Kaze no Stigma

Volume 1

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: The Disinherited Son Returns 2
Chapter 2: The Sudden Disaster 41
Chapter 3: A Battle with The Past 97
Chapter 4: Returning to Visit, and Then— 164
Chapter 5: Rescue 218
Chapter 6: Decisive Battle 286
Epilogue 351

Chapter 1:
The Disinherited Son Returns

Part 1

"What bad taste…"

That was the first impression he had of this client. Incidentally, this impression did not change in the slightest all the way to the end. A mansion sat arrogantly on the hill, set in a high-class residential area, displaying its design that completely disregarded the harmony of its surroundings. If one were to disregard the mansion thus far, one might have to say it was a rather magnificent view. Climbing up Governor's Hill presented a vast view of the land's rich scenery. When he saw it, he was honestly and completely stunned.

(Did Turkish harems have this feeling?)

Yagami Kazuma didn't seem to be joking when he thought that. "Don't paint the walls of a Japanese house in such wild colors!" he wanted to preach, while grabbing that person's collar. It was that kind of house.This area could probably be considered the origin of Japan's Westernization movement. The first

gaslight was lit here and the very first ice cream in Japan was sold here. One would expect it to be a stylish, refined town with a distinguished history.

(Considering that, this is probably something like a breach of contract…)

He saw a decorated golden carp on the roof and let out a sigh. The image that was held dear in Yokohama, had crumbled away completely, with a clattering sound.

When he accepted the job at the agency, he was given not only an address, but also a detailed map that was completely unnecessary. By asking the neighborhood residents, "what's the house with the poorest taste around here?" even a monkey could manage to find his way here.

- A structure painful to the eyes — he didn't want to call it a house — that when seen, made Kazuma look up to the sky, begging. The sky was empty and blue.

"Hey, at least it's work…" he muttered, trying to convince himself.

However, this was the same Kazuma whose looks probably wouldn't by any means be called appropriate

for work. Wearing a checkered shirt covered by a black jacket with jeans and sneakers, this 22-year-old man seemed, no matter how one looked at him, no different than a student from a nearby university. He was completely blind to his own faults though. As he continued his observations, he noticed something strange. The dark aura that covered the mansion was thicker than he was told; because of this, perhaps even an ordinary person with no psychic background could sense the aura that was presently surrounding the mansion.

(Maybe I should just go back…)

Nagged by a horribly bad premonition, Kazuma's thought was halfway serious. The dark aura covering the mansion was something more unearthly than he had expected, but it wasn't so bad that he couldn't deal with it. For this reason, his premonition was that of a bad omen.

Yet, something else was up.

Judging from his experiences up until then, it was a credible and important premonition. However, he couldn't throw away this job on that alone. This was his first assignment in Japan; if he broke off the ar-

rangement with a reason like that, there was no doubt that he would never get any jobs from the agency in the future. He made his way toward the mansion with heavy steps and stopped in front of a ridiculously huge gate. As he stood in front of the doorbell, Kazuma was still unsure if he should continue this job. Danger signals bombarded his instincts and he couldn't help wanting to run away. However…

"Yagami-sama, I presume."

Without any warning, a female voice came from the intercom and completely disrupted Kazuma's thinking. He jumped back with a start and stood on guard as the voice continued.

"You've been expected. Kindly enter through the door on the side."

Click. As she spoke, a small door towards the right side of the gate unlocked. Apparently, there was no one to escort him inside.

(Compared with that "you've been expected," that's some rude treatment…)

He felt uncomfortable, but he was dealing with a customer. He entered through the side door as in-

structed. Inside the fence was a large number of security cameras and sensors.

"They must live a very shadowy life…" Kazuma muttered.

Multiple cameras followed him as he walked into the entryway. Irritation rose in him, almost to the point of wanting to kill whoever put him under this rude surveillance. Somehow though, Kazuma managed to repress himself.

"Eeek…"

That was what he'd intended, but apparently it showed on his face. The maid who came to greet him became fearful of him as if she had just come across a man-eating bear. Kazuma hurriedly smoothed over his expression.

"Welcome! Please, come this way."

Somehow she changed her face of terror, as if she were being picked up and eaten, to an overly bright smile. It didn't seem possible for someone to change their expression so dramatically, forgetting their suspicions instantly, yet the maid smiled as if nothing had happened. As the maid walked ahead to lead him to

the living room, Kazuma observed her gratifyingly swaying bottom.

(It would have been better if I'd left…)

Kazuma felt deep regret at his choice as soon as he arrived at the living room and saw what was inside. A thin, little man laid back with his legs outstretched, introduced himself as Sakamoto Nanigashi, the master of the mansion. Kazuma recognized him as the client, but he wasn't alone. There was also a practitioner in the room whose face he knew all to well. That practitioner, upon seeing Kazuma, showed fear on his face for a moment but immediately twisted his lips into a sneer and glared at Kazuma with a face full of scorn.

"What? The other practitioner was you Kazuma? You became a disinherited child of the Kannagi because of your incompetence and now you dare to call yourself a practitioner?"

Those explanatory words were probably for Sakamoto to hear. Practitioner—Kannagi. The youngest child of the branch family, Yuuki Shinji, truly took great pleasure in mocking Kazuma. Sakamoto showed the response that Shinji expected. His expression changed as he approached Kazuma.

"Is this true? Isn't this different from what you said? You said you were a top-class spiritual practitioner, which was why I hired you!"

Kazuma, calmly making a step back with each step his client made forward, answered…

"I don't know what the person at the agency told you but if you're dissatisfied, perhaps I should leave?"

"Hmmph, that's right."

Sakamoto's eyes showed a faintly cunning light. Kazuma's desire to work, which was scarce even at the best of times, quickly neared zero.

"Mmmm, how about this? Why don't you both try the exorcism and only the successful one gets paid? Ahh, naturally, I won't tell the loser to return the advance payment."

"Good idea, yeah."

They were flippant words, but Shinji had immediately accepted them. Then, with the face of someone who was completely made a fool of, he asked Kazuma.

"And what are you going to do?"

"I'm out."

Kazuma gave an immediate reply. In the scornful stares of the two, not even a muscle of their eyebrow moved.

"Hmmph, coward! Sucking your finger like a baby! I'll show you a model example of an Enjutsu."

"Model example, eh? Tough talk for the youngest child of the branch family."

"Y-you!"

Shinji was enraged from being insulted by the person who he looked down upon. Completely forgetting about being in front of a client, he tightened a fist and lunged forward. He sent a powerful punch directed at Kazuma's face, yet Kazuma easily dodged the punch by stepping aside to his left. Shinji, who had inserted a great deal of force into his punch, lost his balance and fell. At the last moment, he managed to make it look like a feint by attempting to kick Kazuma's temple from his blind spot.

However, Kazuma, as if he had seen it coming, casually bent his head back. The heel of Shinji's left leg passed by a few millimeters in front of his eyes. Kazuma moved like the leaves of a tree swaying in the wind, without hesitation. After dodging Shinji's kick,

he immediately swept Shinji's pivoting leg, making him trip and fall down on all fours to the floor.

"Sh-shit!"

Shinji barely managed to perform an ukemi and quickly got back up. Incorrigible, he assumed a fighting posture.

"You! Do you think that you can beat me in Taijutsu? You were not even a match for the me from four years ago. There's no way you can be an opponent for me right now."

"Sh-shut up!"

Kazuma did not show the least bit of triumph. He chided disinterestedly, as if facing a defiant child. Being looked down upon from such a securely elevated position, Shinji's reason made a sound and broke.

"Stop it right there you two."

A restraining voice broke in, turning the two heads towards the speaker. Sakamoto showed great satisfaction at successfully getting both their attention. In a tone as if he was scolding a child, he shouted…

"I didn't call you here to fight! The furnishings in this room, no matter which one you look at, are all

more expensive than what I'm paying you! Any kind of rough behavior would be troublesome, okay?"

Suddenly, around the vicinity of money talk, there was a scumbag. The person in question was probably attempting to flaunt his assets, but for the ones made to listen, it was nothing but the stink of the *nouveau riche* pushed up their noses.

(Maybe I'll leave… since I still get the advance payment…)

With the discomfort continuing to rise with no end in sight, Kazuma's desire to work had already disappeared. He couldn't ignore the agony of simply being in the place.

"Mm…?"

Instantly, without warning, an unearthly presence began to converge…

"It's coming…"

The unearthly presence spread throughout the mansion and directed its focus to one point in the living room. Kazuma casually moved back so that Sakamoto and Shinji were between himself and this presence.

"What's that? What just…?"

The unearthly presence solidified into a smoky black figure. Shinji, seconds slower than Kazuma, finally noticed it too.

"Hmmm, so it came out?"

"Wh-what? What's wrong?"

Hesitatingly breaking the suddenly tense atmosphere, Sakamoto shouted in a shrill voice.

Kazuma answered in place of Shinji, who was already beginning to focus his mind for the use of a jutsu.

"It's time to work. The 'evil spirit', or whatever you've been struggling with just came out."

While giving this offhand explanation, Kazuma felt a beyond-ordinary sense of unease.

(That's no evil spirit. What kind of thing is it?)

When Kazuma first accepted this assignment, the person at the agency said "It is just a normal evil-spirit exorcism."

— Hey, your first job should be one of these, right? If you're as good as the rumors say, you should be able to take that evil spirit with one hand or another —

A superficial seeming man, but with definite achievements. Their kind of work was, in some sense,

even more than practitioners', it was a work where confidence was life. Making a mistake this big was extremely unlikely. It wasn't an easy business, so such an irresponsible agent would not survive.

(Was I set up? Well, fine. Should I just observe his skill?)

Kazuma leaned against the wall, crossed his arms, and looked about as if sightseeing. Shinji focused his mind to prepare himself for the appearance of the "evil spirit." He was apparently planning to burn it the moment it appeared. It was easy to see from his expression. Suddenly, the space in front of Shinji turned dark and thick. Shinji faced both his palms towards each other in order to set up a transparent ball in front of his chest. A small fire ignited between those palms.

Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooon…

A voice full of resentment shook the air as the evil spirit revealed itself. A distorted face stood before them, projecting hatred across the room.

"Eeep!"

"HAAAA!!"

Paying no attention to the screaming Sakamoto, Shinji released a devastating flame alongside a sharp

yell. The evil spirit would be cleansed on contact with the summoned fire and would disappear without a trace… or so Shinji believed. However…

"Idiot."

Gioooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo…

While the evil spirit's cries of agony echoed and Shinji snickered…the flame exploded.

"Gahhhhhhhhhh!?"

Shinji screamed as he was wrapped in the flames that he had summoned. In a moment, the entire living room was engulfed in flames.

Kakakakakakakakakakakakakakakaka

The entity before them had overcome Shinji's attack and had devoured the flame. The youma began to sneer with laughter.

Part 2

Even among the *Enjutsu* users who could freely manipulate fire, the Kannagi family was famous for their superior strength. It was not simply because their power was great. The reason laid in the special ability passed on in their family's blood. The flame they manipulated was not created by the physical phenomenon of simply accelerating molecular motion. It possessed the power to burn away impurities and destroy evil.

Because of this "purifying flame" the Kannagi family practitioners held absolute dominance over *youma*, evil spirits, and all beings who transgressed the law. However, even with the ability given by blood, depending on the extent to which their blood was diluted with each generation, it was inevitable that their power would eventually deteriorate.

The branch family practitioners had long lost the highest rank of the "gold" flame attribute. If a youma with a fire attribute was their opponent, the flame that they released would merely be absorbed by the youma instead of purifying and destroying it.

…Which was what had happened just now—

The living room had become a purgatory. The high-class furniture and the shag carpet were already carbonizing. The glass from the chandelier on the ceiling had melted and turned into a grotesque art object. This wouldn't have happened if someone from the head family purified the youma.

"I wonder if he's dead…" Kazuma muttered with a refreshed face.

A cool breeze wrapped around Kazuma, preventing the raging fire from touching him. Even the heat that the flame emitted was sealed off; not a drop of sweat was on Kazuma's face.

"H-help…"

A frail voice rang in his eardrums. Kazuma looked down at the blackened object at his feet.

His client Sakamoto had rolled into the kekkai, screaming. He didn't seem to be dead though he was burned here and there.

"Aaaaaa! He-help me!"

Sakamoto screamed as he clung onto Kazuma's legs. However, Kazuma heartlessly kicked away his client.

Thud!

Sakamoto's face writhed in pain as he was mercilessly trampled upon. Since Kazuma didn't want to touch anything beyond his slippers, he brought down his heel instead of stepping on him. The skull could have been making a creaking sound, but that wasn't a big problem.

Kazuma stepped on Sakamoto's head and stated clearly, "you're not my client and I don't have a habit of saving middle-aged men."

"If it's money, I'll pay. Twice as much, or so…"

"Twice? Is your life worth only a million?"

Kazuma took a cigarette from his pocket. He gently stretched out his hand, exposing the cigarette's tip outside of the kekkai and began to smoke.

Sakamoto didn't have the luxury to be so relaxed though. Whether by chance or on purpose, there were holes in the area of the kekkai near Sakamoto. Some of the flames passed through the holes and touched him.

"Hot-! Ee-eeee! Help! Fine!! I'll pay 10 million!"

"Thanks for your business."

Upon tossing away his cigarette, Kazuma's face let out a smile similar to that of a demon who had made a profitable deal.

"All right now. Then, won't you please stand back?"

Kazuma kicked Sakamoto in the rear, and, while sending Sakamoto rolling into the side of the room, Kazuma proclaimed, "you're in the way."

He began muttering in a low voice and waved his right hand sideways in a mowing motion. As if being squeezed out by his hand, the raging fire was instantly expelled through the window.

The fire didn't spread to the grass and trees in the garden. Instead, it scattered and then vanished.

At that moment, a fireball with a distorted face floated in the center of the room. Now the youma's true form was in front of Kazuma.

Hyuuoou-

In place of the extinguished fire, wind raged across the room. Kazuma stood quietly and with his hand still in his jacket pocket, directed the wind to erase the flames still remaining in the room.

The fight was already over. The youma was unable to even put up any resistance against Kazuma's overwhelming power as it was torn to pieces. All that was left to do was wait for its annihilation.

"And with this…"

Kazuma slowly raised his right hand. A person gifted with the sixth sense would have been terrified upon seeing the amount of wind power that was gathering in his hand.

"…The end!"

The hand swung down ten times faster than it came up. From his right hand, an invisible blade that sliced through air came forth, slicing the youma neatly in two.

There were no spirit fragments remaining. Kazuma quietly observed the destroyed youma with a calm look.

"Finished," Kazuma told Sakamoto. Sakamoto was still lying on the floor, dumbfounded.

"Pay the money in three days. Otherwise, would you like to regret having ever been born?"

It was identical to what a criminal would say. Even if it was a mistake, it wasn't the way one would speak to a customer.

However, Sakamoto, realizing the horror of going against Kazuma, didn't even dare to complain.

"Y-yes. Understood. But something terrible has happened to Yuuki-kun. I never thought something so serious would happen."

Without a word Kazuma approached what appeared to be the ashes of Shinji's remains and trampled on them to Sakamoto's despair. As expected, Sakamoto protested…

"Wh-what are you doing!? I don't know what happened between you two but please show some respect for the dead!"

"He's not dead…" Kazuma dryly spat the words out and then continued to kick Shinji again and again.

Upon doing so, the ash covering the surface fell off; Sakamoto noticed that Shinji appeared to be un-

damaged by the flame that had covered him a while ago.

"Wh-wha…?"

Sakamoto doubted his eyes as he beheld the unbelievable scene. Kazuma gave an offhand explanation.

"All of the Kannagi bloodline receive the divine protection of the fire spirits. Even people from the branch family wouldn't die from this degree of fire."

Kazuma curled his lips in self-derision and added, "though I'm the exception."

"Uu…Guu…"

Shinji murmured, waking up. After looking around him, he confirmed that the youma was destroyed.

"You did this?"

"It's just like you saw."

Who do you think you are, saying whatever you please?—Kazuma was already aware that Shinji was conscious the whole time. Shinji hurriedly attempted an explanation.

"So you noticed…? But, I couldn't help. I honestly couldn't move."

"I don't want to hear your excuses."

Kazuma coldly stated this over his shoulder, as he turned his back. Shinji called out to the unhesitating figure leaving. There was still something he wanted to ask.

"Why did you return?"

"On a whim, I guess."

At Kazuma's lazy answer, Shinji sharpened his gaze thinking that his question had been evaded.

"'A whim…' Do you believe the elders will accept that?"

"I was only disinherited, I wasn't exiled. Where I go is my business."

"What are you planning?"

"Nothing in particular," Kazuma answered curtly, shrugging his shoulders.

"Are you returning to the Kannagi?"

"Not even if I die."

Kazuma answered as if spitting out the words. Then, this time, without hesitation, he walked off.

Shinji was driven by a sense of unease that he couldn't suppress. He continued to stare at Kazuma.

(I have to tell this to the soushu as soon as possible…)

In a sense, Shinji's unease was on the mark. From that moment, a war to push the Kannagi into the abyss of ruin began.

Part 3

"Did you know? It seems that Kazuma has returned to Japan. What's more, he's become a Fuujutsu practitioner."

"What! That incompetent guy? It must be dead simple, then, to be a Fuujutsu practitioner."

"Nope, 'I'm a dark magician' is what I heard. For him to become a practitioner, he'd have to sell his soul to the devil, right?"

"Ah, that's probably true."

"Ahahahahahahahahahahahaha…"

That day, rumors about Kazuma were the talk of the Kannagi main house. Of the elders (the general term for those who retired from active service and are now overseeing the management of the practitioners) who heard Shinji's report, only one refrained from jokingly spreading around nonsense.

Shinji was currently under probation for the offense of the aforesaid failure of his duty. Tail fin, dorsal fin, belly fins; all were wildly added to the rumor, until it grew to maturity. Not one person tried to stop it.

The source of the rumors, the elders, appeared to be in complete delight. The people known as *elders*—excluding the extremely serious exceptions—were basically men of leisure. "Looking important is work," and so on, was the gossip some attacked with.

When there was no work, they would drink tea all day and amuse themselves by talking about various topics. Obviously, they could not resist something interesting to talk about.

They danced with joy inside upon hearing Shinji's news. The elders, when they passed the verdict of probation on the dejected Shinji, even had something of a skipping type of light gait while they drank tea and turned back to each other. They haphazardly began talking like this:

"Ohh, did you know…?"

The elders, during this work time, were like different people in energetic activity.

Within an hour, there was almost nobody in the huge mansion who had not heard of Kazuma's return to the country. It certainly reached the servants, spreading to all kinds of people afterwards.

It was, in short, a situation where almost nobody knew the true facts. It wasn't a big problem for the elders, though, since their attitude was pretty much, *If it's interesting, who cares what happens later!*

And so, news of Kazuma spread in the exact opposite direction than what Shinji had hoped for.

To wit:

"Kazuma's returned as a dark magician."

"Kazuma was secretly murdered; he's buried in the back garden."

"Kazuma clashed with Shinji during work and suddenly killed him."

"Kazuma made a contract with the wind spirits. An evil demon."

The truth was subtly mixed in, but it was distorted so much that nobody could really interpret it. Obviously, no one feared Kazuma's retribution.

Kazuma, the main family's failure who had left all his talent in his mother's womb, like liquid skimmed off the top, had found a preferable power to take in, it seemed. Nobody laughed at that.

However, there were a small number of exceptions. One of them was the current suzerain, Kannagi

Juugo. During supper, in the humorous talk that was being told, there was one item Juugo was interested in.

"Ohhhh? Kazuma chose Fuujutsu? Did you know that, Genma?"

Juugo spoke to his cousin sitting next to him. For some reason, as if harboring some ill will, Genma's smile was filled with hatred.

"…Oh"

Genma answered briefly. Apparently the rumor had already reached his ears, as he didn't appear disturbed.

However, it was clear he wasn't happy about the rumor either. The saying, *like someone chewing up a bitter bug,* perfectly described his frown as he gripped a tight fist.

If Kazuma was in front of me, I'd want to strangle him to death. His expression openly displayed his thoughts.

"It's shameful."

"It's not especially shameful." Juugo answered lightly. He gave a command to a nearby servant: "I would like to hear a detailed account. Call Shinji."

"Certainly."

The moment he arrived, Shinji bowed down so low that he scraped the tatami in his prostration. His tension was great; he was sweating from his forehead and breathing awkwardly.

Truthfully, the difference in status between the Kannagi's main family and branch family was absolute. It was impossible for the branch family to even dream of a revolution.

Tradition and social status meant nothing in the Kannagi's system. The two families were simply separated by the overwhelming difference in power.

If a rebellion were to occur, Enjutsu practitioners like Juugo or Genma could simply smash everyone in the branch family by wiggling a finger. Because of this hopeless difference in power, no thoughts of rebellion were harbored.

Therefore, Shinji's tension was understandable. He was in front of Juugo, whose superiority was similar to a god, and had to recount his clumsy failure. This was definitely worse than his original feelings.

"Raise your face. You don't have to humble yourself like that."

Juugo spoke in a friendly manner. However, looking into the suzerain's face and speaking was far too overwhelming for Shinji. In the end, he raised his face, but his eyes still stared at the tatami as he submitted his report.

"A-and, I now have the privilege of being allowed to give this report."

"…I see."

After Shinji finished recounting everything, Juugo remained silent for a while after saying that.

"…I see."

As if to confirm, he repeated it once more. He closed his eyes lightly, and reminisced back to when his nephew (to be accurate, the relation was more separated than that, but he used the label since it was too much trouble) had left 4 years ago.

(—What a poor child he was.)

If Kazuma had been born to any but the Kannagi family, he would probably have been considered a superior child. Excellent intellect, good reflexes, and

great promise in learning the jutsu; all jutsu except one. He was unable to manipulate fire.

However, for the Kannagi family, this was the most important ability.

No matter what else he was proficient at, someone with no talent for manipulating fire was treated as incompetent. Because of this, Kazuma was no longer part of the Kannagi.

Still— Juugo thought.

(Why didn't you ask me for help, Kazuma? There was no need to disown you from the family. If it was me, I would have made a place for you. Whatever Genma said, I wouldn't have cared about the Enjutsu, I would have made use of your talent, yet despite that…)

Juugo looked down at his right leg. It was made of metal and plastic. If that accident hadn't happened, and the "rule of inheritance" hadn't been rushed, would Kazuma be here right now?

Unfortunately, it was far too late. Kazuma had thrown away the family, their name; all that was Kannagi, and had left Japan. This was reality. The *past* is a thing that could never be changed.

"…Suzerain?"

An uncertain voice brought Juugo back to reality. Looking around, he found everyone in an awkward silence. It wasn't surprising, as there were almost none among them who had not tormented Kazuma.

However, the one who had driven Kazuma out was calm. That person, Genma, spoke without a single change in his expression.

"Suzerain. Kazuma is already someone without any connection to the Kannagi. There is no need to worry about him."

"Genma, you would say that of your own son—"

"I have only one son, Ren."

Genma spoke coolly, interrupting the suzerain's words. Juugo considered replying, but, disliking unproductive battles, he decided to put other, safer words into his mouth.

"It's fine then. After all, Kazuma has become successful in Fuujutsu. Maybe it was best that he left the Kannagi… Or maybe, Hyoue, if he had been entrusted to your care, could he have become skilled and powerful?"

"Perhaps."

Sitting at a lower seat, Hyoue, the head of the Fuuga clan, answered sullenly.

Genma again cut in with an objection.

"We are all afraid that even though Fuujutsu and such are, after all, lower arts. The most they are capable of is acting as assistants to Enjutsu practitioners. Even if we had known four years ago of Kazuma's talent for Fuujutsu and left him to people like the Fuuga clan, clearly, we would still have had to disinherit him."

Hearing his art publicly insulted, Hyoue twisted his face in humiliation. However, nobody paid any attention to Hyoue nor his face.

To the Kannagi family, who only valued fighting power, the Fuuga clan, having been given the reconnaissance and battle support duties, was limited to a lower status. Genma was not trying to start a fight. He was not saying anything beyond the normal beliefs of the other Kannagi.

"…We will go no further with this talk. Dinner will become unpleasant."

At Juugo's words, everyone clearly showed relieved expressions on their faces. As if on cue, cheerful

talk began, and they rolled around laughing at silly jokes.

Though awkwardly, the usual dining hall atmosphere returned.

And so, nobody noticed the dark light harbored in Hyoue's eyes. He suppressed his thoughts from showing up on his expression, and murmured in a voice so small it did not even reach his own ears.

"I will not forget this disgrace, Genma…"

Part 4

"Kannagi… no, Yagami Kazuma…? You came back at a very good time!"

"Huo-huo-huo…" A hoarse laugh broke the strained silence. Not a single streak of light could be found in the single room filled with darkness.

"And…?"

"Yes, it's better if everyone hears this. Finally, the time has come. The time when we shall dispel the disgrace that has lasted 300 years. Now is the time for us to regain the power we lost, and return to our previous, glorious position."

"Ohhhhhhhhh…"

A stifled commotion filled the air. No one shouted. Afraid of being discovered, they kept their breaths in check, keeping their tension locked inside the room.

"Oh, when you finally realize it, you Kannagi… We will overthrow you and leave not a single one remaining… Kukuku…"

A low and gloomy voice echoed with resentment darker than darkness…

"U-uwaaaaaaaaaa! Wha-what, what are you doing-?!"

Late at night on that same day, Shinji screamed out in terror. Nearby were two freshly severed heads, which tumbled down onto the floor. Following them were two headless corpses. And standing before him, a human?

Shinji was unable to say for certain. There was nothing different from a human by outward appearance, but it possessed an aura that a human could not possibly have.

The two corpses—who had been alive until 30 seconds ago—had been captured in a *kekkai* without any chance to prepare themselves and were immediately decapitated.

The mysterious person had not moved a single finger. And yet Shinji had clearly witnessed an incredible force slicing the two heads off as if they were nothing. Or rather, Shinji had been forced to witness.

Even though the other two surpassed him in skill, Shinji was the only person left alive. It wasn't because of luck. Shinji realized this more than anyone else.

He was being toyed with. This demon in human shape was feeding on Shinji's fear and hopelessness. It held off killing him for the moment, playing with him lazily, enjoying his empty resistance.

"What the hell?! What did I do…?"

The *thing* gave no answer. It came closer without even making footsteps, taking its time.

The *thing* remained completely silent. Nothing came out as it drew closer, wielding an invisible sword.

Silence remained even after severing those heads. The two blood-covered heads rolling on the ground seemed not to have noticed their own deaths as they still had their drunken, relaxed slack smiles.

Shinji knew of only one person who could do what this *thing* had just done. He had just met that person yesterday. In addition, that person had a motive to kill them.

Shinji became frantic, begging the *thing* for forgiveness. His voice did a complete turn.

"Ka-Kazuma? You're Kazuma, right? Forgive me—it was my fault, I-I regret it, so please, forgive meeee—"

The only reply was a flash from the wind-blade. It severed his right arm at the base. Formed from a high density of spirits, the blade cut through meat and bone as if it were tofu.

"Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!"

While screaming, Shinji threw himself fully into starting Enjutsu. The intense concentration from being so close to death brought forth the greatest power of his 25 years of life.

The *thing* became covered in a golden flame, the same one that had the power to destroy any and all demons, the highest level of purification. The flame burned brightly through the darkness.

"Y-yeah! I think I—"

Suddenly, *that thing*, now a huge torch, began to move. Shinji's face, full of hope, froze.

The *thing* stretched out a hand, taking hold of the golden flame, *and in one movement, tore it from its body.*

The *thing* emerged from the flame's restraints completely uninjured. Its body, and even its clothes, remained undamaged without any sign of having been engulfed by fire.

The *thing* slowly turned to Shinji and began walking. Underneath the freezing moonlight, without a sound, it came closer, an ominous shadow.

This was, in some ways, twisted. There was something there that the eye could not help but be fascinated by. A scene filled with beauty that one had to admit was from the spirit world.

"Hee, heehee, heeheeeeheeheehee-, kyahahahaha, ahahahaha!"

Suddenly, Shinji began laughing in a strange voice.

Evidently, his mental equilibrium had snapped from an overload of fear. Even as the wind-blade soundlessly sliced through his body, splitting it in half, he tumbled over laughing without even showing a reaction.

Perhaps the *thing* got tired of Shinji's lack of response. It casually sliced off his head as if throwing away an unwanted toy.

There was a dull *thunk.* The third head rolled on the ground.

The *thing* remained dissatisfied even after killing everyone. It continued to slice up the bodies. Though it was only for a few minutes, the three bodies were

cut into many small pieces that even the parents of the corpses would no longer recognize; they wouldn't even be able to tell what kind of flesh it was or what limb it was.

As the raw stink of blood and meat drifted through the kekkai, the *thing* laughed cruelly and vanished as if melting into the air.

Afterwards, three severed heads remained. Though the bodies were in pieces, there was not one injury on those heads.

Somehow, the three heads had ended up facing the gate in a straight line. Each had a strange smile, as if to say to anyone coming through that gate, "Welcome to a nightmare."

And so the tragedy began…

Chapter 2: The Sudden Disaster

Part 1

"Still not ready? How much longer do we have to wait, Hyoue?"

"Please, just a little longer." Hyoue replied to the seemingly impatient person.

The person waiting for Hyoue closed his eyes pensively and walked away. Hyoue felt the wind blowing against him. The air was filled with the *ki* of the youma and passed beneath Hyoue's palm like a wind that would swallow anyone. It was already dawn by the time the shredded remains of the three people were discovered. This unbelievably serious situation completely shocked the entire Kannagi clan. The Kannagi clan was undeniably astonished. Before their reflexes could respond, the three defensively-prepared people were killed, without anyone else even being alerted. The Fuuga clan had been summoned in order to better understand the situation. Hyoue had gathered the youma *ki* to understand who the enemy was.

"Hmm"

"T—this is…"

Quiet concentration. Hyoue gathered the youma *ki* in his palms without letting any of it flow out. It was a very cold air. Even for powerful practitioners, the *ki* provided sufficient reasons to fear it.

"This was caused by Fuujutsu, and was created by a practitioner who is on a completely different level from my Fuuga clan. This practitioner trapped the three victims in a wind *kekkai* and then killed them."

Hyoue's report was not in the least beneficial. Any practitioner could have easily deduced that from the sight of the incident.

"I understand that much. But, who did it?!"

"If you require a detailed report, I would like you to allow me more time," Hyoue replied indistinctly.

"Then do it quickly! You and your clan can act…"

"Everyone be quiet!"

At Juugo's angry voice, everyone present became silent. Juugo then spoke in a consoling voice.

"So it's like that? Good job, you may retire… Right, how's the health of Ryuuya?"

Hyoue appeared surprised at that moment due to the Suzerain's concern over his son's health.

"Yes… If he quietly recuperates, there shouldn't be any problems. However, he can no longer recover to the level of working for the Kannagi clan anymore. This unworthy son really is an embarrassment."

"It can't be helped if he is ill. Don't blame Ryuuya, just focus on his recovery."

Hyoue bowed to Juugo's words of gratitude.

"Yes… Thank you very much. I will give instructions to my subordinates as I will now retire…"

"Then please, I await your reply, Hyoue."

The head of the Fuuga clan bowed silently and left.

The enemy was a Fuujutsu practitioner who loathed the Kannagi clan. Naturally, everyone thought of a certain person who had—coincidentally—just returned to Japan.

"It's Kazuma! He obtained strength for revenge and returned to Japan! My fellow clan members, let us destroy the traitor Kazuma. Find him without delay and kill him!"

The person who made such an aggressive comment was the previous Suzerain, Yorimichi. Even though he was retired, he still had the air of a Suzerain. The entire clan loathed him, though he was unaware of this.

"Chichiue, please. We don't have enough evidence to prove that Kazuma did this." Juugo said in an attempt to stop Yorimichi's tirade.

"You—! Who but Kazuma could have done this…?"

"Yorimichi, please hold your tongue. When you speak like that, it becomes impossible for us to discuss the issue."

Genma coolly interrupted Yorimichi's ear-shattering ranting, with a cold look that clearly expressed his scorn. The truth is, Genma looked down on Yorimichi with disrespect from the depths of his heart. To him, Yorimichi was a person who had no strength apart from scheming, yet was chosen as the Suzerain. In Yorimichi's thirty years as Suzerain, the strength of the Kannagi clan reached rock bottom. Yorimichi's inability to control the representative sword of the Kannagi clan and his inability to pass the sword onto someone else resulted in it being buried deep in

the warehouse before Juugo's succession to the Suzerain position.

However, Genma was not thinking about such a foolish item. He believed that the one to succeed the position of Suzerain should be the strongest practitioner of Kannagi. Because of this, he did not hate the current Suzerain, Juugo. Genma understood that his own strength couldn't compare. Previously, he wanted to prepare his son to be the next Suzerain. This was not really a scheme; he just wanted to train and prepare Kazuma to give him the strength to become the next Suzerain.

Yorimichi didn't have such beliefs, as he was the type of person who only had ambition for power. Or, at least that was what Genma thought of him. No matter how Genma tried to hide his thoughts, they were clearly revealed as he further enraged Yorimichi. Despite their close blood relationship of uncle and nephew, the hatred between the two deepened again.

"Y-You want to shield Kazuma? No… should I say that this is your scheme? Allowing Kazuma to go outside the country, having him learn jutsu to kill Juugo

and Ayano, and finally letting Ren succeed the position of Suzerain?"

Yorimichi turned his accusing finger towards Genma. This kind of bad will was materializing like "sticky things connecting items together," agitating the rest of the crowd.

"That kind of idea would only come from someone with low scruples."

For Yorimichi to say such things was an almost insulting provocation. Genma did not try to contradict him out of the fear of making an extremely disrespectful reply if he did.

"Chichiue, that's enough!"

Juugo cut in, interrupting the insulting diatribe. He decided to settle it by ordering Yorimichi to be taken away.

"Yorimichi, you must be tired. Please return to your room to rest."

"Wait, Juugo! Genma cannot be trusted! If you don't listen to me now, you will end up regretting it sooner or later!"

Yorimichi was hauled away like luggage. His harsh voice slowly decreased in volume until nothing could be heard.

"I really am sorry for the insulting diatribes of my father. Please forgive him on my behalf."

Juugo placed both of his hands on the tatami in a slight bow. Genma replied indifferently, "I didn't pay attention. The reason for such words is that the previous Suzerain cares deeply for the Kannagi clan."

With an exchange of glances that instantly understood each other, they smiled at the same time. The time for chatting was over, and it was now time to discuss more serious matters.

"As the previous Suzerain said, the timing is too much of a coincidence. It is better for us to meet again and talk."

Genma maintained his silence from the start, perhaps because he did not want to discuss his own son.

"Would Kazuma submit to our instructions willingly?"

"If he won't submit, we will have to use force to bring him here. Even though he has gained strength,

he is still Kazuma. Two or three people will be more than enough to capture him."

"…That's good, then. The selection of persons in charge of this assignment will be your responsibility, Genma. No matter what, it is necessary to bring back Kazuma quickly."

"Understood." Even though Genma had just received an order to capture his own son, Genma was tranquil compared to others.

"Ayano-sama has returned!"

The serious expression on Juugo's face began to relax. Genma put on a highly energetic and fierce look as well.

"Oh, I'm back!"

She appeared without even waiting a second. Bah! She pulled the sliding door open and caught everyone's attention.

"I'm home, Otou-sama! Ehh…? What's going on?"

An assertive young teenage girl appeared before the crowd, noticing the mood a moment later. Her long, pink hair that almost reached her back flowed

along with the movements of her head, representing the blooming of a bishoujo. At that moment, the 'dark and cold' atmosphere completely vanished. Her spiritual energy completely cleansed the room's atmosphere in one breath. The appearance of an unclear enemy who killed family members became muted. The people who had been discussing this situation nonstop now faced a blinding light. Their feelings of discomfort and distress completely vanished.

As if facing the rays of the sun, all movements in the dark ceased to exist. The girl in the doorway, a girl who had the ability to vanquish darkness with spiritual powers not unlike the power of light, was heir of the Suzerain, owner of Enraiha and Juugo's daughter: Kannagi Ayano.

"How's the report, Ayano?"

Juugo tested his daughter with the same serious expression that he used when asking other people. To him, that was the best way for a father to guide his daughter.

"Excuse me." Ayano at that moment finished bowing. "The youma that was released was completely vanquished."

"Hmm, good job."

Finishing her report to the Suzerain as a practitioner, Ayano innocently continued her questioning.

"So, what actually happened, Otou-sama?"

"Hmm—earlier, three people had been killed without being noticed. This is a serious situation!"

Although they were distant relatives, Ayano quieted after hearing how three people from the family had been killed. The 'serious situation' wasn't the fact that 'three people had been killed.' Rather, it was because it was 'without being noticed.'

This was not some callous sentiment, but it was an understanding of what was of primary importance. For a girl of only sixteen years of age, who had such a strong will and discipline, it was surprising.

"Nobody saw who it was? A Fuujutsu practitioner?"

"Of course there's a suspect." Faced with Ayano's questions, Juugo replied heavily, "…It's Kazuma."

"Who's that?"

Faced with this kind of close and revealing speech, Juugo's 'sun vein' furrowed.

"Think carefully about your older cousin's name… the one who you fought against in the 'Succession Ceremony' for Enraiha, the representative sword of the Kannagi clan."

"Older cousin… Could it be the Kazuma who left the family four years ago? Could that even be called a fight?"

Juugo secretly spied on Genma's expression to see if there were any changes from hearing Ayano's blunt words. Genma's inner feelings were not apparent, as his outer unreadable appearance didn't change at all.

"Right, I heard he left the country… and trained elsewhere. Later, he became a Fuujutsu practitioner?"

"That's how it is. Supposedly, he returned to Japan recently and changed his name to Yagami Kazuma. Yesterday, he met with the late Shinji during a job, where he beautifully completed it. It seems like he has trained very hard in those four years."

"Kazuma… Looks like he hates us…" Finally remembering, Ayano looked distant.

"It could be like that," Genma replied without any facial expression.

"But, even though it is like that, we cannot just kill him. If it was done by him, we need to use his life to pay for the crimes."

"If…?"

Ayano turned to look at Genma, searching for a clue as to what Genma was thinking. Genma accepted Ayano's look without any change. The one who disinherited Kazuma and the one who provided the reason for his disinheritance crossed gazes. The first to look away was Ayano. Strength as practitioners aside, her life's experience was immensely surpassed. In reality, even with careful searching, she still lacked the confidence in her ability to win. Ayano stopped her meaningless gaze, and turned to look towards Juugo.

"So, what do we do next? Eliminate him?"

After seeing his daughter say such words so easily, Juugo immediately replied.

"We still cannot be certain whether Kazuma was the one who did it, but no matter. We should find him and talk with him first."

"…Yes…"

Perhaps due to the mighty power that Enraiha bears, whenever Ayano was faced with a problem, she

was inclined to use power to resolve it. Juugo had always hoped that she understood her position as the next clan chief and therefore had to be more flexible in her thinking.

"You have just finished a mission, you must be tired, today get some good rest."

"…I understand."

Even though she did not seem pleased, Ayano still obeyed her father's words and quickly left the scene after bowing. The attitude she portrayed by not even looking at Juugo showed just how unhappy she was.

"…This stubborn child."

Juugo sighed as he muttered this. However, despite his tone being so bitter, he was still unable to hide the overflowing love he had for her.

Part 2

It was easy for the information network of the Kannagi clan to find out where Kazuma was.

Finding him the next morning did not really require any special methods because he used his own name to register into a hotel.

Consequently, at Genma's command, two practitioners were sent out.

Yuuki Shingo and Oogami Takeya were the strongest practitioners of the branch families. Even though they had opposing personalities, they were great friends. This combination, outside the main family, could be said to be without equal.

From Genma's point of view, he had thrown in the two strongest cards at hand. However, the selection of the oldest son of the Yuuki family might have been a deadly mistake. Why? That was because this man had absolutely no desire to convince Kazuma.

"Kazuma, you bastard, I will cut you into ten thousand pieces."

"If he dies, it will be problematic. At least leave him with the ability to talk when we take him back."

As they waited for the upcoming report, they headed directly towards Kazuma. Of course, they had absolutely no desire to persuade him; however, they never expected that they would be assaulted.

"Is the report ready yet?"

"It's going to be ready soon."

This kind of discussion couldn't satisfy them at all. They didn't know how many times they had asked. Given that the two of them were still waiting to receive the same report, it didn't matter how much they asked…

"What the hell are they doing, that useless Fuuga clan! It's that one person, Kazuma; can't they easily bring him over!?"

Shingo reprimanded angrily as they began turning the arrowhead towards the Fuuga clan.

"This is worrying. The Fuuga clan might even be connected to this situation."

Takeya forcefully said some pretty words to sway Shingo. A situation in which the Fuuga clan was shielding him wasn't impossible, after all. Takeya's plan to insult them and redirect Shingo's anger was certainly welcomed.

Thinking shortly, Shingo gritted his teeth angrily and said, “damn it, they only have slightly sharper senses, what’s there to be complacent about?”

“Don’t say it like that. They’re just a bunch of sad people with non-discussable… Nil fighting power. Failing to do something this simple, aren’t they very pathetic?”

“That’s right, hahaahahahahahaaaaa…”

Just as Takeya had wished, Shingo had completely forgotten about the issue of the reprimand. Hearing this sudden liberated laughter, Takeya had a thought not unlike one from 10 seconds ago. “Still not ready yet?” Similarly, he felt it to be very slow and lengthy.

“Incoming, in the area right ahead, about 500 meters. Looks like he hasn’t noticed.”

Suddenly, amidst the conversation between the two, a voice appeared. It was from a jutsu used by the Fuuga clan called “Method of Summoning/Calling Spirits”. It allowed the wind to carry voices over large distances.

"He's coming! I won't leave him any limbs, arms or legs. Burn it all! Let's attack!"

This was not voiced for anyone to hear, only Shingo's mumblings to himself. It could be seen from his hatred-filled eyes that his passion certainly could be really problematic.

Shingo rattled on about how he would execute Kazuma. He hoped Kazuma would at least put up some resistance before dying so that he and Takeya could slowly torture him to the brink of death. Shingo was determined to make Kazuma suffer as painfully as possible.

Takeya pulled a small distance away from Shingo from this, thinking 'so this guy is this dangerous.' And so, the distance between their hearts grew larger.

Just when a rift between their friendship was about to form, Kazuma appeared.

They faced the apparently defenseless and casual Kazuma. Takeya arrogantly greeted him.

"Long time no see, Kazuma!"

"…Oh, you're the successor of the Oogami family?"

Kazuma paused for a moment to recollect his memories. However, Takeya took it as a display of shock as if Kazuma had just realized he was being ambushed. His arrogant upraising mentality weakened Takeya's concentration.

"Do you know why we are here?"

Takeya questioned using a tone filled with superiority. At the same moment, he calmed Shingo, whose

eyes were blood-shot and whose heart was filled with the desire to release his flames.

"No idea."

Kazuma's reply could not be any more honest. Yet, it was not entirely without a sense of taunting. He used a joking action to exaggeratedly shrug his shoulders and shake his head. As expected, he managed to piss Takeya off enough for his veins to show.

However, Takeya succeeded in controlling his anger, and, after recovering his cool, began to explain.

"Yesterday night, three practitioners of the Kannagi clan were killed."

"Uhmm… and?"

Kazuma asked, with the same tone of supreme authority.

"The person who killed them was a Fuujutsu practitioner."

"…"

"…"

Their surroundings were covered in silence as a warm wind blew through the dusk on Tree-Shadow Road. The red leaves began to dance lightly, shined upon by a crimson sun that dyed them an even darker

shade of red. This was the beauty that appears before the darkness that controls the world.

"…"

The first to open his mouth was Kazuma. It seemed like he detested the still silence even more than being stared at by the two men.

"So, what's the matter?"

"The Suzerain has things to ask you! Follow us!"

"It wasn't me. Are you finished?"

Kazuma said, clearly showing his desire to leave. He suddenly bounced to the side. An instant later, the space that Kazuma had just jumped away from became engulfed in a fireball.

Kazuma looked towards the perpetrator. Shingo, using a tone like a natural-born deep-voiced singer, shouted.

"Hm hm hm, what's the matter, you finally admit it? Then, there is no other way besides force to subdue you!"

At the same time, 'tongues of crimson' surrounded Shingo and began to burn and dance.

Even though these flames were attached to Shingo's body, his clothes were not burned. He was exhibiting an unexpected level of precision.

As the flames continued to move on his body, Shingo became so happy that his lips slanted. He proclaimed…

"If you refuse to talk about it, then you are very suspicious. I'll burn off your arms and legs! Lessening the weight will make you easier to transport! I won't kill you, but could you continue to live in such a humiliating condition? After the Suzerain finishes his questioning, I'll be merciful, and kill you within one week! You can use that time to fully regret your life. I want you to know that after killing Shinji, I absolutely cannot allow you to continue living untroubled!"

Assuming that the future would be as Shingo claimed, Kazuma nevertheless was still faced with watching the crazed, laughing Shingo as if he was observing some kind of rare animal. He turned to Takeya and asked very seriously…

"So the Kannagi clan still feeds this kind of thing?"

"—No, ahh…hu…"

Takeya really had no reply. He, who considered himself to be normal, did not want to be associated with the thing next to him as though they were of the same kind.

"Shingo always adored Shinji. Now he hates you for killing him, he is quite within reason."

"That's why I said it wasn't me."

"Then please go and clarify everything with the Suzerain."

"I am no longer part of the Kannagi clan. If the Suzerain has business with me, tell him to come and look for me himself. Please pass it along to him like that."

"It seems … The negotiations have broken down then."

In order to make good on his words, Takeya raised his 'ki.' He then directed the surrounding fire spirits to dance with his conscience.

The surrounding temperature rose enough to be felt with the skin. Even though the fire spirits had yet to materialize, the surrounding area had clearly changed in physics.

Seemingly frightened by the emergence of such elevated fighting spirit, scores of red leaves continued to

flutter down, instantly changing into ash and floating away before touching Takeya's body.

Remaining subdued, Kazuma stood with his hands in his leather jacket, watching the two of them. It seemed like he had no desire to confront the Kannagi clan, though it was hard to tell from that kind of pose.

"This is your last opportunity. Yield humbly to us, Kazuma."

Faced with Takeya's final ultimatum, Kazuma raised his middle finger and said.

"Take a good look at yourselves before coming."

Shingo and Takeya moved in complete coordination, releasing their fireball attacks at the same time.

"Die!!!"

"You idiot!"

The instant they started their jutsu, the two believed that victory would be definite. Two of the clan's strongest practitioners were attacking at the same time. No matter what kind of strategy Kazuma had, facing those two massive powers would be hopeless.

But…

Boom!

The fireball in Takeya's hand suddenly exploded. He was incredulous that the fireball had such a big categorical runaway explosion.

The fireball, leaving Takeya's control, was like a wild animal with its tooth pulled out. Even with the protection of the fire spirit, it was impossible to shield against the crash of the explosion's force.

The shock struck his entire body and Takeya was simply knocked out.

(W, What? What just happened…? Shit, Shingo, leave…)

Unfortunately, Shingo had similarly lost consciousness, with black and blue continuously pulsing on his face.

As Kazuma returned his hands into the pockets of his leather jacket, he lowered his head to the two people before him. After flashing a condescending grin, he walked right by the two unconscious persons' sides.

Contradicting his wish to leave immediately, Kazuma stopped. As if feeling something, he looked towards the trees where there was no one.

"If you want to pick a fight with me, I won't be merciful."

At the same time, one of the trees split in half. There was no noise from the chopped tree. A guarding Fuujutsu practitioner slowly slid down from it.

Already forgetting to hide himself, this person stood while dumbly staring at Kazuma. As Kazuma turned to leave, he became fearful. “The one we lured was him? The prey we were hunting is this frightening thing—?”

Part 3

"Seriously, father worries too much. I alone am enough. I don't know how many times I have repeated this. When will he acknowledge me? Am I that untrustworthy?"

"The Suzerain acknowledges the young mistress' abilities, but as a father he is simply worrying about his daughter."

Confronted with the disgruntled Ayano, the man in his forties cajoled her.

Ayano had been ordered to a certain temple in the city of Yokohama Yamate to strengthen the weakening seal inside. Coincidentally, this place was very close to where Kazuma had extorted every cent from his employer. Basically, this was where he had exorcised only a few days ago. However, Ayano knew nothing of this.

Upon arriving at the location and discovering that the seal had deteriorated to a point beyond the previously assumed limits, Ayano immediately discarded the idea of resealing it, instead deciding to eliminate the seal. Without any attempt to test it, she immediately ripped off the seal.

One of her favorite sayings was, “this method is faster.”

People without significant confidence in their own abilities would not say something like that. However, the two men that accompanied her knew that she had the prerequisite abilities needed to complement such self-confidence.

Certainly, Juugo also knew that she had this kind of ability, but such worries of a father were within reason. Even if Ayano described Juugo as stupid or foolish, most of time he still sent two or more people to protect her.

“He always lectures me. ‘Don’t mix work with your private life.’ ‘Don’t follow your own desires to do things.’ Isn’t that right, Uncle Masato?”

Still discharging her irritation, Ayano faced the said man, Masato, the younger brother of the head of the Yuuki family.

“Because he is the Suzerain, he cannot mull over such minor issues.”

A smile and a laugh appeared on Masato’s thin face. As a member of one of the branch families, he

certainly was not thinking about the consequence, but it seemed like Ayano hadn't really noticed or cared.

This man, Oogami Masato, although possessing strength greater than his older brother, disliked scheming for the position of family head. And so, he went off to Tibet to train like an eccentric person.

When he returned to Japan, he was ordered to protect Ayano. Juugo held him in high regard, as from the first time Ayano went on a mission, he was continually responsible for her protection.

Ayano also had good feelings about this easygoing relative. Contrasting the princess-like treatment that most people gave her, Masato's causal attitude was quite refreshing for her and felt very good.

Consequently, they referred to each other (Uncle Masato and Ojo-sama) as if they were a real family.

"Maybe if it's to allow the younger practitioner here to learn, this kind of reasoning is possible. Isn't that so, Takeshi…Takeshi?"

"Ahh, yes!?"

The younger practitioner was staring at Ayano with eyes of admiration. Oogami Takeshi's uncle had to call out many times before he finally paid attention.

"Did you not hear… Stop staring stupidly at Ojo-sama, and be prepared. We don't know when the seal will be released."

"Yes, I understand! Just as Uncle has said! It is really a great honor to be allowed to watch Ayano-sama's striking fight method!"

In an attempt to look good in front of Ayano, Takeshi pointlessly shouted in a loud voice. He stared at Ayano with admiration and reverence. After all, to Takeshi's generation of practitioners, Ayano had the status of a goddess. Being able to watch her striking method from close by, while guarding her, was a task anyone would accept.

"Yes—It's—like—this?"

"Yes, it's like that!"

The exhilaration of being able to talk to Ayano flowed from Takeshi's entire body. Though, Ayano did not like being looked up to like that. It gave her the feeling that she was separate from normal people, instead becoming an entity that she didn't want to be.

Unfortunately, no matter how often she explained that, it was useless. It was Takeshi's only, yet simple,

means of showing deference to a much stronger and more beautiful existence.

"Ah, forget it. … It's about time."

Ayano, sensing the expanding ki of the youma, relaxed and turned herself towards the main hall. Her miniskirt started to flutter and dance.

Now, why would Ayano be wearing her high school uniform?

This was not only to allow her to normally attend high school. Since, if you thought about it, the best outfit for a high school student was their uniform. So, Juugo focused upon this point and added, within the range of his abilities, the best class of defensive spells to it.

The uniform, in order to allow better transpiration, was woven from the best type of silk there was. That is, during the process of fabrication, air was mixed into it. Furthermore, everything was sewn from expensive materials.

As a result, a high school uniform was made from extravagant amounts of money and time. It would not be wrong to call it a work of art; since, the high cost certainly made it worthy. The money placed into this

uniform was enough to buy a car, or even a luxury house.

Of course, Ayano paid attention to wear this outfit, not because of its capabilities, but because it was a gift given to her by her father. As a result, she frequently wore this outfit in combat.

In this uniform, the world's most expensive combat outfit, Ayano watched as the seal began breaking. She took a deep breath and started moving and warming up her own inner strength.

Pah!

A clapping sound started to vibrate within the room. Ayano opened her two closed palms. A flaming line appeared between them. She grasped it with her right hand, swinging it horizontally.

The meter-long, burning line instantly materialized into a crimson sword.

There was no blunt side to this bright crimson sword, as it had two edges. The blade of the sword was surrounded by a golden flame, releasing vivid beautiful light. It was as beautiful as one could imagine.

The sword was the Kannagi clan's supreme treasure, Enraiha. It was awarded to the Kannagi clan's founder by the King of the Fire Spirits. It has been passed down and used to defeat evil ever since. '

Ayano lifted Enraiha upwards, grasping the sword with her other hand as well and making a downward stroke. Golden pieces of the flame trailed behind it, spreading in all directions. In an instant, she beautifully stopped the sword before her eyes. Whether it was done ten thousand times or a hundred thousand times, this was a beautiful motion that could always be appreciated.

The vase of the shrine approached its limits and, with a "pong" sound, burst open. Even before the pieces could finish falling, a white light shot towards Ayano.

Ayano made a downward stroke with Enraiha, attacking the light head on. Upon contact, the white substance gave off a sound like sprinkling water on a burning hot pot and vaporized.

"Ugh, it's sticky."

Ayano mumbled after seeing it disperse in all directions. The material was connected by thin threads.

She redirected her vision to the inside of the main hall, seeing a few dots of light. The thing slowly moved forward and revealed itself.

"Wah…"

Ayano, inadvertently surprised, let out a gasp. The thing that had appeared was —

Possessing a great number of eyes and beyond eight feet, covered with dirty yet rigid fur, the segmented animal produced sounds like "kulah, kulah" as its legs brought it into the open. Anyone would shiver upon seeing its full appearance, a monstrous spider freak.

"Earth Spider huh… Need help?"

"Not necessary."

Ayano immediately replied. Though it produced a very disgusting feeling, there was no time for complaints. It seemed like she was more afraid of disappointing her otou-san, and fighting against spiders or cockroaches was nothing in comparison.

(Come…)

Summoning fire spirits does not require chants and such. As if following Ayano's thinking, fire spirits assembled themselves and flew into Enraiha. The light

of the flame became even brighter, shining along the sword's blade.

Within the range of her awareness, Ayano continuously summoned more spirits. Juugo had instructed her many times, "Don't be like other practitioners. The spirits are not commanded; you can't be too arrogant."

"The spirits have the same level of existence as we do."

Juugo frequently repeated this saying, that spirits were the means to safeguard the existence of the world's order. The Kannagi clan had a contract with the spirit king, and the spirits were only helpers.

Of course, Ayano also understood that her own strength was borrowed. The power was gifted for a short period of time, and only to seal or vanquish the inconsistencies in the world's order.

Therefore, she was not ordering them, because such matters were unnecessary. If the correct way of thinking was clear, the fire spirits would certainly answer.

Having respect for the world, not obtaining huge power or being arrogant. Ayano, no matter what, al-

ways called out to them like this: "Please, lend me your strength…"

"V… Very formidable…"

Takeshi watched, dumbfounded as the enormous number of spirits gathered into Ayano's body. The amount of spirits he could manage was only one small portion of hers. For him, it was the first time seeing the main family's power, as different from him as sky and ground.

"Ah, formidable, right!?"

Masato said, smiling to show off his own condition.

"Even though we said it recently, no matter how hard we work, we won't be able to reach such levels."

His uncle's reply already forgotten, Takeshi once again looked at Ayano.

Ayano, holding Enraiha, continued to confront the earth spider.

(What should I do… looks like I can't get close…)

Even though the summoned spirits were already enough to destroy the earth spider, she really didn't have the confidence given her distance from it. Even though Enraiha was an ancient sword used for sum-

moning, it was necessary to employ it to its fullest potential.

In other words, she had to close in and puncture or split the earth spider, then, from the inside, burn its body completely.

(Of course, if that was done, more sticky stuff will probably fly out from the cut… after the explosion, the body's pieces would fly everywhere… and if it's female, after opening its skin, hundreds of spiders might come out… No—!)

Just thinking about it made her hair stand on end. Inside, Ayano started complaining bitterly. If Takeshi could have read Ayano's inner thoughts then, his own thoughts of reverence would probably have disappeared.

The earth spider seemed to seize the opening that Ayano's mulling gave. Using its long legs it made a 'palapala' sound, as it turned its body and started moving.

"You want to escape!?"

Suddenly, white silk spat out from the tail towards the pursuing Ayano. At the same time, she pulled up Enraiha to face it.

Golden flames emerged from Enraiha, burning the spider's web. Unfortunately, because of the blockage by the silk, Ayano still could not get close to the earth spider.

Ayano could only stop and focus her mind. She took a deep breath, tuning her ki, and calmed down.

(This kind of thing can't do any real kind of obstruction. I'll just kill it in a few seconds.)

Lifting up Enraiha, she performed a downward swing with her full strength. The golden flame, the highest level of fire purification, not only completely burned down the earth spider's web, but also closed in directly on the earth spider itself.

Kaboom!!

With the sounds of the explosion, the earth spider was surrounded by flames.

"Got…Gotcha…?"

But, as Ayano dubiously mumbled while looking into the flames, what emerged was only a white cocoon-like object. What really surprised her was the "pishpish" sound of it splitting open.

Pang!

Like a thin layer of glass shattering, the middle of the cocoon split open and the earth spider reappeared, completely unharmed.

The webbing apparently contained some special component that could block spiritual energies. The spider had used that covering to hide its body and avoid the purifying powers of the flames.

"…It's~ it's quite formidable, hu~"

Ayano sang. At first glance she seemed very calm, but a careful study would reveal that her sun vein had already risen.

Ayano did not attack with full strength, but her confidence ebbed when she saw it being completely deflected.

"Only a little bug, don't be so haughty —!!"

Resonating with Ayano's anger, an even greater amount of fire spirits gathered. There was no materialization, but in the vicinity, enough spirits gathered to equal a volcano opening.

"Then… regretting it now?"

Accompanying her anger, Ayano entered a selfless state. Her composure was completely engulfed by anger, and transformed into strength.

She continuously summoned stronger and even stronger spirits. This time, it wasn't directly released into a single area but, using her immovable strength of mind, was released into one direction.

This time, Ayano held Enraiha perpendicular to her body. Focused on running after the earth spider, she took a deep breath and released it with a sharp "kiai."

"Haa!!"

In an instant, the flame flew into the earth spider's body. Its abdomen expanded and exploded, transforming it into a miniature torch.

Within this seemingly small torch gathered the entire area's fire spirits. The explosion of the fireball continued to expand. This time the earth spider was definitely transformed into ashes.

Nothing was left. The pieces of the spider's body and the youma spirit around it had been completed purified. Now, the temple where the youma was vanquished finally filled with the tranquil air that temples should have.

If an attack from the outside could be defended against, simply attack from the inside. Even though

describing it was easy, actually doing it was close to impossible.

This was like the world's own close relationship with the spirits. Like the life force of living beings.

The body of living beings that have water cannot remain unaffected by water spirits, and living beings that have heat house fire spirits within their bodies.

Though youma materialize, they can't escape this rule.

However, in ordinary circumstances, controlling the spirits residing within the body was impossible.

These kinds of spirits, infinitely close to a living beings' survival instinct, hold enormous willpower. The origin of life does not allow control to anyone.

Even a genius can't control it easily as he would like. But in this world, no matter what, there are always people who spend their entire day saying 'logical boundaries' are for foolish and sad humans.

"Heh. It was this kind of thing."

Ayano released a pleasing smile and turned around to go back.

"Then, let's go! …"

She couldn't continue her dialogue. Ayano stupidly stared at the two's body language. Probably, the bigger body was Masato, and on its left was Takeshi's body. Everything seemed to be just fine.

But—

(How come there's no head…?)

The two were standing naturally. The taller one still had both hands in his pockets, and the other seemed unable to control his exhilaration, holding a fist in front of his chest.

It didn't seem odd that they had no heads, for whatever reason.

Ayano looked toward the ground, where two round objects entered her eyes. Ayano stumbled, nearly falling over, but steadied herself. She knelt down and lifted one of them onto her knees. Even though it was quite heavy, Ayano smiled as she smelled the odor of the person that she really liked. Ayano hugged the head of the one who, from a very young age, fought together with her and taught her the ways of survival. Quietly, she mumbled.

"Uncle… head… fell down… uh…"

Ayano sadly smiled as she tried to put Masato's head back on. Hoping that by doing this he would return to life, she stubbornly forced the head back on.

As if mocking Ayano, an unseen blade lightly carved into Masato's body. In a second, the big body split apart into hundreds or even thousands of slices of meat.

His heart had stopped pumping a while ago, so fresh blood did not fly out from the sharp cuts.

Although there were no sounds of flowing blood or breaking flesh, strangely enough, it still gave people a feeling of reality.

Under the blowing of the wind, Masato's body came apart without a sound. As if it had gone through a paper shredder, the pieces of meat danced in the sky like flower petals.

Ayano watched the frozen picture.

Drip.

Accompanying the sound of a water droplet, something fell on her face. Ayano unconsciously tried to remove it.

It was a bright red piece of meat, which still had some remaining warmth. Ayano's consciousness seemed to pass through a filter as she realized what was on her fingers. She only recovered a small amount.

"No…"

It had once been a part of Masato's body, but now he could no longer be described even as a corpse.

"I don't want this!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

At that moment, Ayano's screams could be heard far and wide.

"Kukukukuku—"

This sound that vibrated through the air, the snickering sound, wasn't directly sent to the brain. To

better describe it, accompanying this "snigger" were some strong feelings. This derision towards the opponent's "awareness" seemed to provoke and annoy Ayano.

Faced with the appearance of the enemy, due to frequent training of the body and spirit, Ayano instantly entered fighting mode.

She buried deep within her the feeling of anguish, substituting it with the feelings of animation and anticipation.

Directing her anger towards her opponent, she challenged it…

"Come out!"

Ayano had already surpassed the limits of anger that could be expressed on a human's face, though she seemed determined that she could. She looked up.

It was *that thing*. In front of a branch on a huge tree stood a human shadow, completely without fear of danger and with its right hand resting in its pocket.

Since it was a place without much light, she was unable to clearly see her opponents face. It didn't really matter, though, since the overflowing of evil ki already told her 'this is an enemy.'

Ayano silently swung Enraiha upwards.

There was no need to know who it was, nor was there the need to accumulate strength. All that was required was to calmly mix in the killing intent and kill it in one strike. The sharpened killing intent transformed the burning sword blade, whose flames flowed upwards.

Moving lightly, clearly defying its weight, *that thing* avoided the slash, leaping high onto the roof as if flying. *That thing* looked down towards Ayano, slowly moving its body as if to say "chase away."

This was clearly a trap, but Ayano bravely accepted this kind of provocation.

(Even if it is a trap, it doesn't matter, I will definitely annihilate you.)

Deep within herself, she was submitting to such a type of anger. Ayano had already begun a rampage for revenge.

Part 4

In the sky, the ki of a youma suddenly appeared.

"Hmm…"

Kazuma suddenly looked toward the sky. To conceal itself, it had gathered bit by bit in the sky. Suddenly, a wind blade flashed out. Kazuma had absolutely no time to defend, and even flying backwards to avoid it took his full effort.

The wind blade passed right by Kazuma, who was still rolling away, and then, slightly changing its angle, sliced the Fuuga practitioner, Shingo, and Takeya in half with one strike.

"Wait! Wait a second!!"

Kazuma yelled mindlessly as the situation changed into something that he had not predicted.

(I… I was actually ambushed!?)

Actually, it was the first time he had been ambushed. Furthermore, it was an ambush with wind spirits? No matter who had summoned them, it was impossible for Kazuma not to feel the gathering of such a degree of wind spirits. No matter how great the Fuujutsu practitioner, the use of Fuujutsu could not

deceive Kazuma. This was not a question of the difference between abilities, but that the rules were thus.

However, what had just occurred was that impossible situation. Kazuma immediately broke off his thoughts, focusing towards the thing in the sky.

"What's… that thing…?"

A really small object, perhaps smaller than 20 mm, was floating in the sky about 20-30 meters above. Near it, five things rose and flew out.

"Someone's hand…? Doesn't seem so… red leaves…?

No matter how he looked, it didn't seem like it was flying in the sky. It wasn't controlling the wind. With a questioning look, Kazuma suddenly discovered what that thing really was.

It was a human hand. A strange human hand was flying in the sky. However, even recognizing it didn't solve anything, as it still couldn't change the fact that three people had been killed.

(Anyways, first let's defeat it!)

Kazuma mumbled in a voice that only he himself could hear. The thing that looked like a hand flew higher into the sky… and disappeared.

"Wait! What are you actually thinking!?"

Kazuma protested to the wind spirits, as this was clearly against the contract. But, the spirits only made an uncertain sound, and they certainly couldn't tell Kazuma the location of the strange human hand that disappeared.

"What's going on…"

The miserable condition in front of his eyes, the corpses of Shingo, Takeya and the Fuuga practitioner, seemed just as if it was done by Kazuma.

The spirits disobeyed the contract? — Impossible.

If Kazuma were to hear this kind of situation from someone else, he would have highly doubted the mental state of that person. This was why what just happened was a very irregular situation.

The spirits did have cognizant qualities. Initial Principle — it was when the world was first created. Immutable laws were created alongside this existing world, and the spirits obeyed them, allowing this world to remain intact in this kind of shape and reality. Bees have to live in a beehive, and one part of himself recognizes his own existence. The portion, even if it had intelligence, couldn't possibly think. And of

course, it was impossible for spirits to have the type of free will to break a contract.

If the spirits had the free will to move about, then the laws of science would be broken. The world would be destroyed within three days.

All of the wind spirits should obey Kazuma's command. Even the spirits contracted with *that thing* had to follow that rule. But it didn't…

"An exception…"

Kazuma thought of the worst case scenario, and sighed weakly.

(There's someone like me? No way…)

It made him lose his enthusiasm just by thinking about it. Perhaps he could be considered lucky… Of course, Kazuma did not want to think this way at all. He now had no spare time to indulge in thought.

Since he sensed a massive amount of fire spirits coming towards him.

(So even Ifrit has come here? Crap, when did Japan become a world of youma!?)

Even before he finished composing his thoughts, a situation appeared that he could not have predicted.

What emerged was not Ifrit, but a young girl. She had red flames and eyes of burning hatred, holding accumulated power in her right hand.

"Kazuma— !!"

The strength of the fire spirits that gathered in her right hand had already crystallized. Ayano seemed to have made up her mind that moment.

Chop!!

Ayano quickly entered the rapidly retreating Kazuma's vision, swinging the red sword that was, for the Kannagi clan, more important than anything else. It was the sword that had made his life very chaotic.

Faced with the godly sword that he would have preferred never to meet again, Kazuma yelled,

"Enraiha!? Are you Ayano!?"

The only answer was a sword flash from Enraiha. Kazuma tried his best to explain to Ayano, who was filled with killing intent and not listening to anything.

"Hey, hey, wait a moment, this is a misunderstanding! They weren't killed by me… hey, you should listen to what other people are saying!"

Flaming white fireballs continuously approached. Kazuma kept dodging and speaking, but Ayano seemed like she couldn't hear at all.

Ayano was already too angry and had already forgotten herself due to the esteemed Masato's death. She had no time to listen to people talking. Furthermore, given what her otou-san had told her, Kazuma was quite suspicious.

Dang!!

"Hey!!!"

The fireball that Kazuma thought he had evaded suddenly exploded, blocking his means of retreat. Noticing this, Ayano took advantage of the explosion to appear in front of his eyes while swinging Enraiha.

"Uncle's revenge!!"

"!!"

With that, she did a two part strike with the intent of splitting Kazuma like bamboo. Kazuma escaped by shifting his body sideways, using his palms to catch the sword handle near its top. Facing Ayano's fiery anger and blood-covered face, he yelled,

"Otou-san? … Genma died?"

However, even before he finished saying it, he realized that it was a mistake. Even though Ayano and Genma's relationship wasn't so bad at first glance, if Genma were to die, Ayano would not try to avenge him.

Another person appeared in his head. The "uncle" from the Oogami family that Ayano had been very close to.

The name was probably…!!

— Bam!

"Ugh…"

Suddenly, Ayano threw her head upwards and struck Kazuma's chin. Because of his pondering, his reflexes were somewhat slower. Though he quickly evaded, the blow still caused dizziness and pain in his head.

Despite that, he calmly asked,

"Oogami Masato died?"

Ayano's face became even more somber. She forced so much strength into Enraiha that its flames could be clearly seen even from a distance.

(Seems like that had the opposite effect…)

Kazuma shrugged his shoulders, sighing. He had no more questions to ask this person filled with such emotion. Faced with this confused, angry little girl, anything he did would be useless.

However, he couldn't kill her. If he was to hurt Ayano, the fool's father, Juugo, would completely recognize him as an enemy. This had to be avoided.

This was not because he feared Juugo, who was the Kannagi clan's strongest practitioner, but when he lived as 'Kannagi Kazuma,' Juugo was his only ally. In order not to sadden him, he could only do one thing.

"Ah— Ayano-chan? I'm — leaving then, the issue with cleaning up the corpses will be left to you. Then, see ya."

Skillfully avoiding the tenacious approaching flames, Kazuma escaped.

"—Wait, wait a second!"

Kazuma, turning his back to Ayano, leaped up, surrounding himself with wind, and flew upwards about 10 meters, disappearing.

"Wha… Where did he…"

Kazuma floated directly above her as she continued to look around.

Manipulating the air and changing the reflection rate of light. Kazuma made himself transparent, just as if he was wearing an invisibility cloak. If Ayano had looked closely, she could have seen the parts where waves emerged from high heat, but as she was being controlled by anger and had forgotten herself, she did not.

Kazuma took no pleasure in watching the troubled Ayano, but thought about what he had to do later on.

From the looks of things now, the one who killed Shingo and Takeya has made me his scapegoat. If even Oogami Masato's murder is blamed on me… If they really believe that I am the one who killed Oogami Masato as well…

Will this become an all out war with the Kannagi? Hmmmm… interesting, but this feeling of being toyed with by someone else really sucks… So then, what should I do now?

Hehe, hehe.

Kazuma burst out laughing. The Kannagi clan and the mysterious Fuujutsu practitioner. Two of the strongest things in the world were already assaulting his life. Of course, he could not ignore this.

Chapter 3: A Battle With The Past

Part 1

Kazuma stood alone in the darkness.

Deep in the night, a dead silence shrouded the park. The usual wanderers who occupied the park were nowhere to be found, perhaps chased away by something unknown.

French Hill. This place may sound nice, but due to its dense vegetation, it became a frightening place that would make anyone question whether it could be considered a park. It seemed gloomy even by daylight, and at night, strollers would probably meet with mishap.

At the top of this hill, Kazuma leaned lightly against a tree trunk, resting motionlessly.

His black jacket almost completely concealed his existence, even to people that may have been standing right in front of him.

Just like an experienced hunter, Kazuma had become one with nature.

"…!"

His eyes opened without warning. His body began to shiver due to his unconstrained happiness and fear.

"Here already…"

He mumbled. An unusual heat came through the park entrance, heading straight towards him.

Even someone whose senses were not as sharp as Kazuma's would definitely notice this presence. Because the shining energy waves in the dark were so scary, it gave one the impression of daybreak.

If Ayano at that evening was said to be the sun, then this could only be described as a supernova's explosion.

The other party did not show any intention of hiding his existence. Instead, as though he was boasting it, he walked with the same ease a king would.

As "he" stepped into the plaza, his line of vision shifted to Kazuma, who was standing in the shade of the trees.

"…Am I late?"

"No… the timing is just right."

Kazuma answered as he emerged from the shade, walking into the open without a care.

A statue symbolizing a loving mother and her child stood between them. It was unsure if that was just a coincidence or if Kazuma was using it to mock the situation.

"Let's begin, then."

Kazuma calmly declared the beginning of the battle.

"So you… are unwilling to sit and talk this over…?"

"He" questioned hesitantly.

Perhaps "he" already knew the answer, as his tone slightly implied resignation.

As expected, Kazuma taunted back,

"Let me answer with my power… 'Father'!!"

Kazuma released blades of wind as he spoke. Genma let out flames in retaliation.

Both sides had things they could not afford to lose. The winds and flames fought against each other furiously, perhaps the only way for father and son to communicate upon meeting after four years.

The residence was shrouded with silence. As Genma walked down the corridor alone, he felt like he was in an abandoned house with no one in it.

At this point, most of the members of the family were gathered in the Kannagi residence. Every single one of them breathed quietly as though afraid to be found, too scared to stay alone. They gathered in the main hall, shivering.

There was a basis for their fears, though. Masato, the strongest of the branch families, and Shingo and Takeya, who were rumored to rival even the main branch when together, were murdered one by one. Everyone was scared, afraid that they would be next.

Genma called them cowards for that, but not everyone was as powerful as he was.

"I am late."

Genma kneeled before Juugo's room, and upon receiving permission to enter, slid the paper door open. Genma walked inside, moving while kneeling, and stopped before Juugo, still kneeling. Juugo showed deep hatred in his eyes.

"…You are really late."

(You old sly fox, running away on your own.)

Juugo said, without even bothering to keep his unpleasant thoughts to himself.

"By the way, where is Ayano?"

Genma asked as though nothing had happened.

"She was too noisy, so I sent her out."

Juugo's voice sounded even more displeased because he had just pacified Ayano several minutes ago. Unfortunately, Ayano might have gone to the hotel where Kazuma was staying at to set it aflame in her rage.

"This is something that cannot be helped. She had been in such close terms with Masato after all."

Genma commented as though he had nothing to do with it. Consequently, Juugo became even more furious.

"Oh, I didn't know you were so lenient. Since you're so concerned about Ayano, wouldn't it have been better to calm her down earlier?"

Before, when Ayano was making a big scene shouting and screaming, Genma had turned around as though nothing was happening and had left his seat. And to be so thick-skinned as to come back only once she had finally calmed down was something that even Juugo would grumble about.

"That's because I had to give instructions to everyone in the clan. I also wanted to hear the reports from the Fuuga clan."

Genma decided not to mention these things because they were of no relevance, simply ignoring them. Juugo knew this as well, so he stopped pressing Genma as there were other matters that required discussion.

"So what do you think? Most of the people in the clan pinned the crimes on Kazuma…"

"Killing Masato and Takeshi without Ayano noticing, then deliberately revealing himself before escaping. Then, while making his escape, he spots Shingo and Takeya and kills both of them at the same time. Even though it is theoretically possible considering the timing… it is too difficult to be done."

"Hearing you say that makes me feel much better. I almost thought I was the only normal one."

After hearing such words from Juugo, who didn't normally mock others, Genma smirked.

"It's because everyone feels insecure. Rather than facing some unknown enemy, they find it easier to believe that Kazuma is back in Japan for revenge."

"…Does Ayano feel insecure as well?"

"She just lost her rationality due to Masato's death. That's all."

Genma brought the issue across faintly. It was a critical period now, so there was no time to bother with that stubborn girl.

(Once we know the true identity of our enemy, feel free to be angry as much as you want!)

Gemna's thoughts were blunt, even though it would be difficult to say such things out loud.

"Compared to this, a problem still lies with Kazuma. No matter what, his actions are too suspicious. Maybe he is in league with the enemy!"

"That could be true. If he really didn't do it, he should have come and explained everything. I don't think he's afraid we might kill him without hearing him out first. Leaving you aside, he should still trust me a lot."

"Indeed."

Genma could only give a bitter smile in response to Juugo's mocking remarks. After all, he had done nothing to deserve Kazuma's trust, so he had no way of rebutting Juugo's words at that time.

"However, I am the only one who can capture Kazuma."

"…Were Shingo and Takeya really killed by Kazuma?"

"Even though this is just speculation, I believe the murderer was someone else… perhaps the person who Ayano saw. But Kazuma did defeat the two of them beforehand. From the marks the wind blades made as they grazed the ground and the position of Shingo and Takeya's bodies, they were definitely lying on the ground when they were attacked."

Genma spoke faintly, but it sounded more like boasting in Juugo's ears. If Genma's assumptions were true, Kazuma had already attained strength that rivaled the main branch.

"You seem really happy, Genma. If this is true, why did you abandon Kazuma back then?"

Juugo finally asked the question that he had held back for four years. He had always wondered about it.

No matter how bad Genma was at expressing himself, even if no one could understand what he was thinking, Juugo had come to realize that Genma actually loved Kazuma a lot.

"I was born as a Kannagi and live as a Kannagi. I am not allowed to choose any other way of living… it is the same for my son as well."

"So is that why you threw him somewhere you couldn't reach? So he could choose any path he desired? Even so, there was no need to leave him all alone! What if he had starved to death by the roadside?"

"Hmph… What are you talking about? He is my son."

"*Sigh*… So that's it."

He had no strength to continue asking after that boastful statement. Juugo decided to return to the main topic once more.

"So, can you defeat Kazuma?"

Genma did not reply. Instead, he fixed his eyes on Juugo. Eyes that were more convincing than any words could be, saying "there is no way I can lose."

"I understand. I shall leave this matter to you then! When will there be results?"

"It should be settled today. If we give our enemies too much time by chasing Kazuma, they will use it as

an advantage. We give them an inch and they will take a mile."

"…I look forward to your performance."

Genma, without reply, showed his respects and quietly left the room, with the intent of nabbing his son with his very own hands.

Part 2

Kazuma was leisurely enjoying his dessert on the 67th story of Yokohama's Landmark Tower, the hotel on Royal Street that came closest to the skies.

Be it a threat or a coax, Kazuma intended to squander off all the cash he obtained by any means possible, no matter how evil or horrendous said methods may be.

However, as though to mock this sadistic decision, his hand phone rang. Kazuma looked, irritated, at the hand phone on the table.

Pirorororororororororo

Staring at his consistently ringing hand phone, Kazuma cursed himself.

Why did I forget to set it to voicemail?

Even with that said, Kazuma could not just turn off his phone.

Pirorororororororororo

The monotonous ringing continued. Kazuma did not pick up the phone, instead mentally listing all the people who know his number, one by one, trying to avoid reality.

Pirorororororororororo

"Ahhh! It's too noisy!"

He finally gave up, and pressed the button to receive the call.

"Who is it?"

Kazuma did not bother to hide his unhappiness. He used a very rude tone, which was sent to the ears of the person at the other end through electronic waves.

"Watashi (It is me)"

The other party was even ruder. Upon hearing the caller's voice, Kazuma immediately regretted his decision to pick up the phone from the bottom of his heart, as it was the voice he least wanted to hear in the world.

"Oh, Mr. Watashi? What a weird name. Did we meet somewhere before?"

"Quit joking around with me"

Though Kazuma tried to joke his way around this, the voice in the phone spoke just as arrogantly as before. Kazuma took a deep breath and prepared himself to duel with the man who had abandoned him in the past.

"It has been a long time. I wonder, can I still call you 'Father'?"

Genma's voice caused his memories of the past to painfully reawaken.

I was still Kazuma Kannagi back then, who was pathetically weak.

Back then, I could never defy my father. I could only mindlessly listen to his orders to continue training, even though he knew I had no talent.

"You lost?"

It was neither a question nor verification. It was an unbelievably calm sentence that surpassed anger and disappointment, one dealt a great blow upon the pitiful loser.

"You lost to some twelve-year old girl?"

The voice repeated, as though speaking purposely.

"…I am…Really sorry…"

The boy placed his forehead on the tatami, squeezing out a very weak voice. The man did not answer, merely glaring at the shivering boy with ice cold eyes.

"…So be it. It was a mistake to even want to train you to be a Enjutsu practitioner."

The man mercilessly gave up on the boy. But somehow, the boy seemed happy about that.

"You don't need to practice Enjutsu anymore from now on."

The boy, about to faint at first, suddenly brightened. The man, upon verification, said the most crucial sentence.

"Someone who is not an Enjutsu practitioner has no need to stay in the Kannagi family."

"…Huh?"

The smile on the boy's face hardened. The man continued talking as though it was a natural thing to do.

"From today on, you are no longer my son. Get lost! Go to some other place!"

"…What…Fath…Father!"

"I am no longer your 'Father'."

The man said coldly.

"Get out of my presence immediately."

With that blunt statement, the man walked out of the room without another glance at the boy.

"Fath…Father! Please wait!"

The man looked down emotionlessly on the boy who hugged his arm, tossing him away. The boy was thrown so hard that he almost hit the wall.

"Fath…Father! Father!"

The boy was unable to stand up and could only cry out in pain and misery. He reached out his hand, but was unable to touch anything. Even so, the boy refused to give up and continued to extend his arm.

"Father!!!!!!"

The man walked away without even turning his head.

There was no one who could reply to this boy who had lost everything now…

"Call me whatever you want."

The voice that would remain blunt even unto the verge of death pulls Kazuma back to reality.

"How about Gen-chan?"

"Why did you come back to Japan?"

Ignoring Kazuma's cheeky response, Genma brought out the main topic.

"I believe the youngest child of the Yuuki family should have mentioned that I came back 'on a whim.' Didn't you hear?"

"…Surrender! It is not too late!"

"You guys seem to be treating me like the criminal. I didn't come here to find trouble with the Kannagi family, but if you guys come knocking on my door, I won't be merciful."

The chat was more of two people talking on their own than a conversation. After all, a conversation requires people to understand, or at least try to understand, each other and give something like a reaction. However, the phrase "understand each other" didn't seem to apply to these two.

"Do you think you can win against the Kannagi family?"

"No one will know unless I try, right?"

Kazuma realized that he was no longer afraid of Genma like he was in the past. Through this newfound arrogance, Kazuma felt a certain sense of warmth from the absence of fear.

(This stubborn old man didn't change a bit…)

Kazuma stopped paying attention to whatever Genma may have been saying at the other end of the phone, indulging himself in his own emotions.

"Kazuma, are you listening?!"

Genma raised his voice. Four years ago, Kazuma might have been kneeling next to the phone begging for forgiveness. Their relationship was one of absolute orders followed with absolute obedience.

"Huh? Oh, of course I'm listening. What is it?"

The sound of Genma's deep sigh came out of the phone as he said,

"I must meet with you. I am going over to you now, is that okay?"

(Good chance.)

Kazuma needed to clarify one thing ever since he heard his father's voice again after four years.

(I want to know whether I have surpassed that man… Whether I have become stronger than the man who ordered me around in the past. No matter how, I must verify this.)

"No, now is not a convenient time."

Kazuma kept his expanding emotions within his heart. Without changing his cheeky way of speech, he said,

"Tonight at twelve, let's meet in French Hill."

"What kind of time is that? The park would have closed long ago!"

"Then no one will come to interrupt, right?"

With those words, Kazuma's tone suddenly changed.

"So you really want to kill me… I accept your challenge, then."

To Genma, I was nothing but a failed product. He wouldn't go easy even when executing punishment on me.

"I realized what you took me as since four years ago. However, I am no longer that little boy. I won't let you order me around anymore."

"…Foolish kid. Fine, then. I shall let you understand the limitations of your own strength."

Genma replied arrogantly. Even though he knew clearly that his son has misunderstood him, he was unable to think of any other reply.

"I shall look forward to it then, 'Father'."

After bidding farewell with excitement, Kazuma ended the call. He switched his phone off immediately and threw it at the desk beside him.

However, the phone missed the intended target and rolled onto the floor.

Looking at his trembling left hand, Kazuma gave a bitter smile. His left hand was shaking so much that he

could not control its strength, but he was not ashamed of that.

(Yeah, of course I'm scared. After all, I am challenging the strongest practitioner of the Kannagi clan.)

He clenched his left fist tightly, as though intending to trap his fear within it.

No matter how afraid I am, I must not run away. To truly sever all ties with the Kannagi clan and to surpass the old me, I must perform the "ritual" of defeating my father, who symbolizes my past.

He did not hate Genma. In fact, now he found the stubbornness in Genma rather pleasant.

But this and that are two different matters. This is something I cannot give in to, no matter what.

The trembling stopped. With a determination beyond the fear he felt in his tightly held left fist, Kazuma muttered to himself,

"I will not run or hide anymore. Nor will I go easy on you… oyaji."

Part 3

The flames that Genma summoned easily swallowed and melted away Kazuma's wind blades.

"…Did you do something just now?"

With his entire body wrapped in golden flames, Genma descended like a god, with the identity of a man with divine power. Such magnificent power made any attempts at resistance seem meaningless.

The mere existence of this man, Kannagi Genma, was enough to instill such feelings into his opponents. With such power, he definitely had that "right".

"…It's not over yet!"

Kazuma subconsciously retreated several steps, shouting as if to encourage himself, and once more began forming wind blades.

"The fun only starts now!"

Almost a hundred wind blades flew towards Genma from all directions. However, the blades did not attack simultaneously. Instead, the wind blades skillfully developed their own paths and speed, flying around the sky.

"Hmmm…"

Genma observed the blades calmly. No matter how he moved, there was no way to fully avoid an attack like that. However, he noticed that each individual blade was no stronger than the ones that came at him earlier.

Genma did not take any action, simply standing there as the blades came at him. As the wind blades flew into the flames wrapped around his body… They vanished without a trace.

(This cannot be…)

Realizing the huge gap between their strength, Kazuma was so shocked that he was at a loss for words. Genma leisurely watched Kazuma's expression.

"I'm sure this isn't your full strength, right? I have no time to play with you, so let me end this now!"

As he announced this, his flames increased at an explosive rate.

Several fire pillars shot out with fierce roars, aiming at Kazuma. It had the shape of a big snake or dragon with an arched body, the materialized form of such a great power.

Genma's attack gave off the impression of a glare from a poisonous snake. Trying to control his body trembling with fear, Kazuma jumped up with all his might.

In the blink of an eye, the place where Kazuma had been was swallowed up by the dragon's mouth. Even though he escaped it, the flames that hit the floor became tiny pieces and continued to rampage violently.

Though they were tiny pieces of flame, they were still flames that Genma controlled. The density of the flames were unusually high, and a direct hit would turn any target into ashes.

Kazuma focused all his attention in avoiding them. He used the flow of air to understand the situation and, by synchronizing with the wind spirits, "saw" every single direction at once.

He accurately grasped the motion of all the flames that rained down from the sky, dodging at times and deflecting them with his wind at other times.

Forcefully taking down all of the flames was not an option. The power of the branch family could not be compared with that of the main family, so Kazuma

had no confidence to survive for even one second with his wind barrier.

(Well, it's not like I can't do it. But now is not the time.)

Having escaped from the firestorm, Kazuma waited calmly for an opportunity to strike. According to Genma's true strength, that was nothing at all. There would have been nothing to be proud of even if he had blocked that attack.

"Oh, you dodged it?"

Genma waved his hand, instantly extinguishing all the flames. As if it was all just an illusion, there was no trace of what had just happened. Not even a leaf was burnt.

"To burn nothing but the intended target? That's not a simple trick."

The higher the level of the Enjutsu practitioner, the easier it was to fully control the spirits and their flames. It could even defy the laws of physics, such as burning on water without boiling the water or forming flames that affected only the intended target.

"I should say the same for you. I originally intended to kill you… But it seems I went too easy on you. You should be proud, I admit that you are someone worthy to fight me."

A gallant smile appeared on his strict face as Genma praised his son. But his son simply scratched his nose tip with a bitter smile in return.

"Ah… Ermm… Actually, you don't need to be so serious… I am, after all, just a failed product. So why don't you relax a bit?"

Genma ignored Kazuma's ridiculous words and began to concentrate. He gathered his power attentively, creating an even stronger power.

(I can see it clearly…)

In contrast to his earlier, flippant expression, Kazuma mobilized all of his energy to try to see through Genma's attack. There would only be one chance, so there was no room for failure.

"Don't die, Kazuma."

Genma had no intention of killing Kazuma, as he did not forget that his main objective was to capture Kazuma. Therefore, Genma released a tremendous amount of power while keeping it at a level that would leave the target barely alive.

(…Now!!)

Kaboom!

The flames that appeared in front of Genma suddenly expanded and exploded. The shockwave hit the vegetation in the area, sent chairs and dustbins flying, and broke streetlights in all directions.

"I succeeded…?"

Genma was still engulfed in flames. Though the results were still unclear, the surroundings looked as

though a bomb has just exploded. The plants fluttered away from Genma, and any movable objects were blown from sight.

(Even though it wasn't a fatal hit, he should have at least taken some damage!)

As the flame subsided, the scene inside became clear. What Kazuma saw inside was…

"So that is your killer shot?"

…Genma, completely unharmed. Even his coat was as tidy as before.

Genma looked at Kazuma calmly.

"And I thought you grew up after these four years… So you only improved by using such cheap tricks? What a disappointment."

His words were as humiliating as four years ago, the day when he looked down upon Kazuma and said, "I have no use for trash."

"Stop joking…"

Kazuma gnashed his teeth, squeezing out his voice with his fist held tight and trembling as the dreadful scenes of the past appeared in his mind one by one. He lost his sense of reasoning.

"What a joke!! Disappointment!? You never expected anything from me!! Do you think you have any right to expect anything now? You, who abandoned me back-"

Genma's insults were too painful for Kazuma, whose scars from four years ago still caused pain in his chest.

"Shut up!"

But Genma only coldly interrupted the screams of the boy who was reminded of the past.

"If you want to make a fuss, I will give you time to do so later. Now you have only two options: either come back yourself, or I shall drag you back. You decide!"

"I choose neither."

Kazuma replied without thinking. He calmed down, since, after all, he was no longer the kid who cried because his father had abandoned him.

"Only you! I would rather die than lose to you! I will definitely defeat you!"

Kazuma answered sharply, while showing his middle finger… Maybe he was still a kid after all!

"So you still think you can defeat me? Without such cheap tricks, you can't even win against Shingo and Takeya!"

"Oh, so you noticed?"

Kazuma shrugged his shoulders lightly as if to say, "I don't care about such a thing."

"By inspecting the corpse, one can notice it easily. It was just a simple manipulation of oxygen to cause combustion. If it went unnoticed, it might have been effective against second rate Enjutsu practitioners and below."

Genma saw through Kazuma's trick completely. Kazuma had simply transferred the oxygen around Shingo to Takeya's surroundings as they were about to release their flames.

The sudden increase in oxygen concentration had caused Takeya's flames to go out of control. On the other hand, Shingo suffered from lack of oxygen as his flames burned the remaining oxygen out.

This was the killer move that Kazuma designed against Enjutsu practitioners. If there were two opponents, it would work even better, as it could kill two birds with one stone.

But as Genma had pointed out, this trick would only work if the opponent was caught off guard.

As mentioned, Enjutsu practitioners can defy the laws of physics. To light a flame without using oxygen was one of the basics of Enjutsu.

"So be it. Since you intend to fight no matter what, I shall show you what irresistible power means!"

Genma raised his *ki* to the maximum. A shade of azure spiritual energy burst out from his body, and the fire spirits around him were dyed blue one by one.

The spirits that were soaked in the azure *ki* similarly materialized in the form of azure flames, replacing the originally glaring golden flames and giving off a clear and transparent blue glow.

Kazuma watched the azure flames in amazement. After swallowing a few times, he mumbled in a hoarse voice…

"This is the first time I have seen it… So this is the azure flame of Kannagi Genma…"

The flames of the Kannagi clan were flames of purification… and the strongest among them were "golden".

That was absolutely true. However, the most outstanding forces in the main family may sometimes surpass this limit.

The “Divine Flame”- This was the invincible power that only the true chosen ones could attain. Adding the color of their own “ki” to their flames was an ability that only eleven have obtained in the past thousand years. The only ones who were able to attain this level after a period of two centuries were Genma with his “azure flame” and Juugo with his “amethyst flame”.

“Watch this closely! This is the true power that your cheap tricks are completely useless against.”

“Oh… This does indeed seem like something my tricks won’t work against.”

Hearing what sounded like a loss declaration, Genma was slightly affected. However, Kazuma was not finished with his words.

“So then, let me get a little serious too!”

With that, Kazuma raised his right hand up and pointed to the sky.

“Stop sounding so…”

Genma held his words back. Wind spirits gathered at Kazuma's command with unbelievable speed, and Genma was attracted to this phenomenon.

"How… How can that be…"

His shock came out as words from his mouth. At that moment, Genma realized for the first time that he had underestimated his son's powers.

Kazuma was not just someone worthy of a fight. He was someone who Genma might not win against even if he went all out.

Genma was stunned for just a few seconds, and those few seconds were just what Kazuma wanted.

Genma quickly started his summoning, but Kazuma informed him calmly.

"It's useless, my summoning speed is faster."

To tell the truth, Kazuma had no confidence of beating Genma in terms of strength. In terms of attack power, fire spirits were the strongest among the four elemental spirits. Therefore, if an Enjutsu practitioner fought an equally powerful Fuujutsu practitioner and both attacked at full strength, the Enjutsu practitioner would definitely win.

In that case, all the Fuujutsu practitioner needed to do was to not let the Enjutsu practitioner attack at full strength.

In terms of speed, wind spirits were the fastest. If the Fuujutsu practitioner began his summoning first, he could attack before his opponent gathered enough strength. So if he aimed for such a time difference, there was no way to lose.

To act weak at first, but reveal his true capabilities when the enemy is unable to obtain full strength.

Some people may consider him despicable, but "righteousness" doesn't exist in Kazuma's dictionary. "A winner is a winner, no matter how it is won" was his philosophy.

Kazuma knew that he was sure to win. He had already gathered more power than Genma had, and all that was left was to release it.

"I will spare your life… Be grateful for that!"

As if condensing the size of a large typhoon by ten thousand times, a very scary energy rampaged violently. The frantic winds turned into countless blades dashing across, cutting the azure flames into tiny bits.

"Argh… Ahhhhhhhhhh!!"

Even so, the frenetic winds did not seem to weaken. They reached Genma's flesh and without stopping at all… went through.

The blades were so fast and sharp that there wasn't even time for the victim to feel pain. Instead, an eternal piercing chill was felt… That was the last feeling Genma had as he succumbed to the darkness.

"…"

Kazuma emotionlessly looked upon his father's body, which was lying flat on the ground with blood flowing out from all over. Genma laid on the red-stained floor, motionless as if dead.

"…!"

Kazuma, whose head had been lowered and whose shoulders began shivering as it spread across his entire body, finally burst out in excitement.

"…Ho…Ha…Haha…Ha…Hahahahahahahaha!! This is great! I won! Now you know how strong I really am! Damn dad! You shall lie down on the sickbed in regret! Ahahahahahahaha…Hahahaha…Haha…Ha…"

Kazuma, who was laughing loudly in the empty park, calmed down all of a sudden and collapsed onto

the floor in lassitude. He looked up into the night sky with a troubled expression.

"I won… What to do… Tsoi Rin… What… should I do from now on…?"

…But the moon did not answer any of his questions.

No one could answer him. The moon just stayed in the unreachable night sky, shining down silently.

Part 4

It was already around two in the morning by the time Kazuma reached his hotel. His steps were somewhat heavy after having to deal with three battles in one day.

But he still could not rest yet. The wind brought a strong scent of fire.

(Kannagi again? When will they ever learn…)

Even though it was troublesome, Kazuma had no intention of running away, as the enemy was waiting by the main entrance of the hotel. Kazuma walked straight to the source.

Perhaps the enemy sensed Kazuma approaching. The thin little shadow sitting beside the flowerbed turned his head.

Due to the darkness of the night, Kazuma was unable to see the person's face clearly, though he could make out a very small figure. The power he possessed was weaker than Ayano's, but on a different level compared to Shingo and Takeya.

(…? Was there such a person in the Kannagi family…?)

The shadow approached the doubtful Kazuma without warning. His face was lit up by the street-lights, revealing that he was younger than expected. A child, around ten or eleven years old, walked up to Kazuma.

He was wearing beige shorts with a duffel coat. His feet were fortified by ankle boots. He was wearing clothes that were casual, yet well made.

His cute face that one may mistake for a girl gave off a gentle, yet mature aura. The youth looked just like a well brought-up little master.

The youth seemed tense as he nervously watched Kazuma, who returned his gaze with suspicious eyes. After staring at each other for a few seconds, the young boy opened his mouth slowly.

"Frankly speaking, I don't really believe it… But if you are here now, then does that mean that father lost?"

(Father…?)

Later on, whenever Kazuma would recall this scene, he would feel really stupid. However, right now he could not understand what this youth meant, so he asked directly,

"…Who are you?"

The youth's eyes instantly became very strict. He seemed to be angry, but because of his cute face, he was not menacing in any way.

"Are you saying that seriously? …Nii-sama"

"'Nii-sama'…? Ah, you're Ren!"

Kazuma clapped his hands and called out his younger brother's name, who was apparently twelve by now.

(Oh yeah, I have a brother.)

Though, if he had said that out loud, Ren would probably have looked down on him forever, so Kazuma forcefully kept his words inside his mouth.

"You sure grew! It's been ten years since we last met, right?"

"…I don't think it has been that long!"

Ren answered strictly.

"Is that so? But it should have been about four years since we last saw each other, right? After all, I don't recall seeing you when I left."

"Yes, you left home without saying a word."

"Oh… Ahh… Sorry about that…"

Ren's voice seemed even more serious. Kazuma could only reply with an embarrassed smile.

The reason why Kazuma forgot about Ren was not because he was heartless… Or rather, not *just* because he was heartless.

Unlike his elder brother, Ren was born with exceptional flame powers, so Genma had high expectations from him. Genma was apparently worried that Kazuma's uselessness might have been passed onto Ren, seeing as how he tried to separate them as much as possible.

The two brothers probably met less than once every half a year. Even so, the pure Ren threw aside his father's intentions and looked up to Kazuma wholeheartedly.

Kazuma, however, could not help but harbor complex feelings towards his talented brother. Despite that, he could not hate the cute, smiling boy who was unaware of those feelings and so remained attached to him.

Even though this was not the outcome Genma wanted, Kazuma and Ren were a pair of close brothers.

…So in the end one could only call that heartless.

"Ah… so what are you doing here?"

Kazuma asked, pulling himself together.

Ren suddenly became serious, looking straight into Kazuma's eyes.

"I… I am here to persuade you."

"…Oh~"

Kazuma grumbled and walked off, leaving Ren behind.

"Nii-sama!?"

"First, let's go into my room! It's been a really busy day, and I'm drained."

After guessing the reason for his fatigue, Ren's expression became clouded. He silently made himself determined to bring Kazuma back.

Ren ran slowly while following Kazuma, who had already reached the room.

Ren lightly sat down on the edge of the sofa. He was not being wary, though. The sofa was way too soft, and he was worried that if he sat down in the middle, he would have been buried within.

Kazuma was sitting in front of a teacup, and Ren was in front of a mug filled with honey and hot milk.

However, neither of them touched their cups. They were looking at each other as though trying to find out what the other was thinking.

"Back to the topic. Why did you come here?"

"…Huh? That is because…"

Kazuma raised his hand, stopping Ren from asking the same question.

"I know the reason. But why? Kannagi Genma made his move, so why did you still come here? Normally, you wouldn't expect him to lose against me!"

Genma would never lose, that was common knowledge in the Kannagi clan. Ever since Juugo lost a leg in a traffic accident, Genma was undoubtedly the strongest practitioner in the Kannagi clan.

They were probably thinking that right now, believing Genma would bring back a badly wounded Kazuma very soon!

However, Ren, despite being someone who believed in the strength of his father more than anyone else, did not seem to feel that way. And that meant…

"What do you know?"

Ren tried his best to fight back against those eyes that seem to see right through him.

"I know some rumors, from some occult website in Europe."

Users of magic, a technique of ancient times, were actually very progressive when it came to using something so extremely convenient as the internet.

The website Ren found was one of those that practitioners used to exchange information.

"I heard them saying… The 'Contractor' is Japanese…"

Kazuma widened his eyes slowly. Ren, witnessing this reaction, gathered up his courage and told Kazuma his assumptions.

"I have no proof. But… I am very certain… that it is you, right? The only Contractor verified to exist in history… That is you, isn't it, Nii-sama?"

"You are wrong."

Kazuma answered in a dull manner. He stopped Ren, who was about to speak, and continued talking.

"Not the only one, there is at least one other. I think we both know this very well."

"So… You are indeed the…"

Ren looked at Kazuma in awe, realizing his indirect answer.

"No matter, this kind of thing isn't important. Let's get to the main topic!"

Kazuma placed one leg over the other comfortably and held up his cup.

Ren sat upright, using his youth-like, straightforward mouth to speak openly.

"So let me ask you, are you the Fuujutsu practitioner who has been killing Kannagi practitioners these last couple of days?"

"I didn't do it."

Kazuma answered in a very straightforward manner as well.

"I said that to everyone I met, but no one believed me. Why?"

Even though he knew that Ren knew the reason, he kept it to himself. Perhaps that was a very wise decision!

"If that is the case, why don't you come back to explain yourself!? At this rate, the whole Kannagi clan will become your enemy soon!"

"…Do you still not get it?"

Hearing Kazuma's calm reply, Ren glared at him with strict eyes… but he still wasn't very taunting.

"No matter how strong you are, against the Kannagi clan…"

"Our old man seemed to have said the same thing! Even though he's in pretty bad shape now, no thanks to me. Ayano can't even be considered a worthy opponent. Those in the branch family are nothing. Therefore, I shouldn't lose as long as I don't fight against the clan chief."

There is no way Ren could rebut against Kazuma's confident words.

Perhaps for the sake of his brother, who seemed ready to cry, Kazuma turned down his tone.

"…I understand that what I'm doing is very silly. To fight just because I can win is pretty much proving that I'm an idiot. If I just head back and say hello, the clan chief will probably forgive me just like that. But… I have no intention of giving in to the Kannagi clan in any way anymore."

Kazuma stopped halfway, flushing some red tea down his throat. The sound of the cup being put back onto the coaster was abnormally clear.

"After so long, I no longer hate the Kannagi family. Even though I am now much more powerful than all

of those who bullied me in the past put together, I don't intend to take revenge and put myself at their level. However, that doesn't mean I've forgotten all the things that they did to me, nor the painful scars left in my heart. In order to overcome the weakness in myself, I gave up on the Kannagi name. Therefore, I shall not give in to the Kannagi clan in any way. I vow upon my name of Yagami to never give in."

His tone was much calmer than his words suggested, yet his unwavering determination was clear.

Ren could only choose to remain silent, obviously unable to touch Kazuma at all.

"Though it is a very stupid determination! After all, it won't hold forever."

"…What do you mean?"

Ren asked, surprised.

Kazuma replied naturally,

"The Kannagi clan will be exterminated soon. I saw one of the enemies today, and he is way beyond Ayano's level. Plus, our old man doesn't seem like he can recover in time!"

Despite being the one who gravely wounded Genma, Kazuma didn't seem like he cared at all.

"You… How can you even say such a thing!? Nii-sama, aren't you part of the Kannagi family too? Is it fine to you even if your family members die!?"

"That's none of my business. I am no longer a Kannagi, nor do I have any family members."

Kazuma clearly answered the questions, even though Ren was shouting out in shock.

"Don't get the sequence wrong, Ren. I didn't abandon the Kannagi family, the Kannagi family abandoned me."

"That is… But…"

"So can you still say that I'm obliged to do anything for the Kannagi clan?"

Ren was unable to say anything. Kazuma's words were very true, after all, and Ren had no right to ask for help either.

But if he were to give up just like that, it would defeat the whole purpose of coming to find Kazuma.

Kazuma had to be persuaded somehow, but Ren could not say anything. Kazuma was emotionlessly looking upon him.

Ren lifted his head, revealing pitiful eyes that sought help.

"…Wu…Wuwu… Wahh… Wuwu…"

Under the consistent staring, Ren finally began to sob.

"Hey hey… Why are you crying over such a trivial matter? Now it seems as though I'm the bad guy!"

Perhaps lacking the self-awareness of a bad guy, Kazuma spit out a rather brainless line.

Ren just continued to weep, unable to reply. In this speechless period, only his sad weeping echoed.

"…Damn it…"

Kazuma was the first to give in. He grabbed a towel by the side and tossed it to Ren, sighing.

"Stay here for tonight! Use that to wipe your face, and go to sleep quickly. Tomorrow… I will send you back."

"…Nii-sama!!"

Ren pulled the towel away, letting out a cheerful cry. He jumped over the table and directly leaped into Kazuma's chest, hugging him.

(I knew this was going to happen…)

Kazuma gently caressed Ren's head, looking at the ceiling.

Even in the past, Kazuma had never been able to refuse Ren's "requests". No matter how unreasonable, as long as he used his angelic smile to ask and beg, crying if he was refused, Kazuma would still listen to him in the end.

This time was no exception. However…

Kazuma grabbed Ren by the back of his neck and easily picked him up. Ren, who was held up like a little cat, looked at Kazuma with a dazed expression. Eventually, however, he let out a smile across his face.

It was not adoration. Ren was simply overly happy.

Upon realizing this, Kazuma found it even harder to hide his suspicions.

(Is this kid really twelve? Is it okay to be this cute?)

Kazuma could not help but fear for Ren's future, but he immediately stopped his thoughts, realizing that something weird could arise.

Kazuma tossed Ren.

Ren spun around once and landed squarely in the sofa.

"Go to sleep!"

"Ehh~~ But…"

Ren seemed displeased at Kazuma's cold words.

"What is it?"

"I want to chat some more! It has been a long time since we last met, after all…"

Kazuma stared at Ren in refusal, but the result was the same as always. Kazuma mentally added this defeat to the hundreds of losses he had against Ren. He had actually already lost count, though he had a vague record at a corner of his head.

"…I get it. What do you want to talk about?"

Kazuma raised the white flag of surrender.

Ren asked timidly,

"Erm… Err… What do I have to do, to be as strong as you, Nii-sama?"

"How would I know the training methods of an Enjutsu practitioner?"

Ren pouted from Kazuma's straightforward answer.

"Besides, you have enough natural talent. There's no need to undergo some weird training, right?"

"That is not true! I am probably the least talented in the main family."

"…Then what can you say about me, who was abandoned by the family due to my lack of talent?"

Kazuma replied as if he had no other choice.

Agitated, Ren spoke out,

"You are very talented! To practice Fuujutsu to its limits! Compared to Nii-sama, I am still only a newbie. My flames are incomparable to Ayano-nee-sama and father."

"…The way you compare yourself with the owner of Enraiha or the Divine Flames is a problem in itself."

"But…"

Ren's expression was filled with anxiety. Apparently, he felt inferior from being among such elite family members.

However, in Kazuma's eyes, the power Ren possessed was not much different from Ayano four years ago. Their difference in power was simply because of Ayano's possession of Enraiha.

As for Juugo and Genma, they were out of the question. Only those with the Divine Flames could be compared to another Divine Flames wielder. Ren was at least ten years too early to feel inferior because of that.

In other words, it was a meaningless comparison. However, even if he said that, Ren was unlikely to accept it. After all, he was lost because of the current difference in power, and failed to see the hope that laid in the future.

"And besides, if you really wish to become stronger, it will happen even if you lack talent."

In the end, Kazuma decided to frankly tell Ren his thoughts. Kazuma didn't like it much, but there was nothing else he could say.

"You mean, 'there is no Talent that surpasses Diligence'?"

Ren pouted with dissatisfaction.

Kazuma waved it away, saying,

"I won't say something as trite as that. There are barriers that can't be overcome by hard work alone, and there are levels that can't be reached without talent… But if you put your heart into it, you'll be too busy to notice such a thing. So, no matter how ridiculous or impossible it seems, all you can do is work hard at it. If you still can't do it after ignoring all common knowledge and limits and working as hard as you can… Well, you can always just give up then."

Perhaps Kazuma's words were too strong, as Ren couldn't help but feel afraid.

"Is… Is that how you got stronger, Nii-sama?"

"Yup, I would be on the brink of death almost weekly!"

"To work so hard like that… Did you really want to take reven… get back at father?"

Maybe Ren feared that the word "revenge" would be too harsh, as he suddenly began stuttering.

Kazuma could only give a bitter smile to Ren's speculation that deferred so much from the truth.

"I'm really happy that you look up to me so much. But I'm not that powerful. The reason I left Japan was to run away… to run away wholeheartedly from Dad… and that woman. To run to somewhere far, far away. I didn't want to have anything to do with the Kannagi family anymore. I didn't even think about taking revenge against our oyaji until he called me."

"Then, why?"

"About that… All I can say is that I've had a lot of difficulties!"

Kazuma tried to get his way out of Ren's innocent question, because the content wasn't suitable for innocent kids like Ren.

"A lot of difficulties?"

"Anyway, it was just a lot… Speaking of which, the last time I was in mainland China, I met the Dragon King…"

"A lot of difficulties…"

"Listen! This happened in Sichuan Province…"

Ren eventually forgot his original question. Without even realizing it, he had become indulged in his brother's stories.

Kazuma let out a sigh of relief deep within his heart as he continued to exaggerate his adventures overseas.

Part 5

After coaxing the excited Ren to sleep, Kazuma finally laid on his end of the bed. He fell asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow, but his rest ended in the blink of an eye.

"…"

Kazuma woke up upon feeling an evil presence and quickly jumped off the bed. As he did so, he sensed some black object passing by slowly beneath his feet.

(This is…!)

Kazuma stepped onto the trembling floor and headed to Ren's room.

"Ren! Are you awake!?"

"Yes!"

Ren had woken up long ago and was already wearing his shoes. Despite his young age, he was still a Kannagi practitioner, and it was impossible for him not to notice such a strong, ominous presence of youki.

"What is happening!?"

"Some idiot sliced the whole hotel! We have to escape now!"

Kazuma grabbed Ren without explaining and ran towards the window.

"Wait… Wait a second, Nii-sama… Don't tell me…"

Kazuma answered Ren's question with his actions. A gust of wind shattered the glass. Kazuma jumped out of the newly made exit without hesitation.

Needless to say, he was hugging Ren throughout the whole process.

Naturally, there was nothing at the other end of the exit. The light of dawn shone upon Earth's surface, which seemed hopelessly far away.

The fear inside Ren transformed into sounds from his mouth.

"Wahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

His cry trailed far behind as the two descended at breakneck speed. Ren shut his eyes tightly.

But they were caught by a gentle wind rather than smashing violently into the ground. Kazuma had skillfully changed his posture, landing his legs perfectly.

"Hey, we reached our destination."

Kazuma lightly knocked Ren, who was gripping him tightly, and informed him that they had already

reached the ground. Ren opened his fearful eyes, and looked at the surroundings.

"Nii… Nii-sama… Am I still alive…?"

"The real trouble starts now."

Ren stood on his own feet, lifting his head to look up. What he saw was unbelievable.

(The hotel is falling from the sky…?)

The hotel was cleanly sliced through about one third of its height from the top, and was now sliding down from there. A building that was approximately a hundred meters in height was falling from a height of two hundred meters. This was easily comparable to a giant meteor dropping onto Earth, a catastrophe beyond human comprehension.

"Some idiot sliced the whole hotel!"

Kazuma's words just now flitted into Ren's head.

(This… was done by a human…?)

The unlucky people who were in the path of the cut dropped down one by one like abandoned puppets. The only fortunate thing for them was that they probably had no time to even be afraid when their bodies were sliced. The upper halves of the corpses

were left, indicating pieces of flesh that no longer had any life.

"Don't move recklessly."

In order to defend against the falling building, Kazuma surrounded himself and Ren with a kekkai of wind. Ren instinctively held on tightly to Kazuma's jacket.

The next moment…

Kadoong… Bam…

The remains of the gigantic building violently crashed onto the ground.

The nightmarishly smooth cutting point brought about a disaster. The upper half of the hotel that smashed into the ground remained in its original upright position. The people who spent their night in that portion of the hotel must have fully enjoyed the ecstasy of a two hundred meter long free-fall. Ren saw countless shadows at the windows, their faces distorted from fear and despair… or was it just his imagination?

"…Argh…"

The hotel that fell at a horrifying speed was totally smashed out of shape. And with that, the kinetic ener-

gy obtained during the free-fall was released in all directions.

Countless pieces, most of them ten meters long, flew towards the two, who were standing right in the center of the impact. These pieces had the destructive power of bombs flying at high speed, but were still forcefully blocked by Kazuma's wind kekkai.

Rather than continuing to stay in their current position, Kazuma used the force of the explosion to fly up into the sky. His spherical kekkai skillfully dissolved the impact, allowing them to float back to a safe distance.

"…Ah…Ah…"

Looking at where the hotel was, Ren moaned.

Dust was everywhere, blocking the actual scene from sight. But…

Those eyes staring upwards displayed great despair. The dust flew no higher than fifty meters, but there was nothing left above that. The lower portion of the hotel, which was supposed to be safe from harm, was no longer there.

The high rise building, famed to be the tallest in Japan… Yokohama's Landmark Tower was completely destroyed.

(This… This can't be… Such a thing…)

Unable to look at the scene directly, Ren shifted his line of vision and looked down, suddenly noticing the floor around him.

Countless holes scarred the blacktop, probably due to the flying pieces. The number of people lying down in the area was unbelievable.

Even though it was just dawn, it was impossible that no one would be moving about in an area so close to the government organization. Whether they were white collar people who left home early in the morning, teenagers going for their morning jog, newspaper distributors or people with some other purpose to wake up so early… They were all hit directly by concrete pieces, and were now lying motionless on the floor, moaning.

The blood pool that soaked the road continued to spread out further. The scattered bystanders were too weak to escape the jaws of death, yet they were still

not dead yet… Or rather, they were unable to die just yet.

Those who had stayed in the hotel might have been more fortunate. After all, at least they could go on without suffering pain.

Ren buried his face into Kazuma's back and held on tight with his trembling hands. He felt as though all those people who were moaning in pain were looking at him, and even blaming him. He could not bear to watch it any further.

"What a big mess he made."

After landing on the floor, Kazuma mumbled as though this has nothing to do with him.

"This… was done by the enemy's Fuujutsu…?"

"Maybe."

"Can't… Can't this be stopped? If it was you, Nii-sama…"

"Ah… Nope, I can't interfere with the wind that guy controls."

Hearing Kazuma's simple and carefree words, Ren became shocked and doubtful.

"That cannot be…?! Because, Nii-sama, you are…"

"Yeah, that's what I think. There's apparently someone else like me."

Unable to say anything, Ren's pale expression shivered slightly. There was nothing to be ashamed of. To have to fight against this kind of enemy, even the Kannagi family…

"Don't look so pitiful. Don't worry. Such a person can't exist."

Ren gave a relieved smile when Kazuma caressed his head, but it changed back into doubt in a moment.

"So then, why is that? You should know already, right?"

"Yeah. After what just happened, I think I am beginning to understand what is going on."

Kazuma curled his fist tightly and, with great force, threw it at one of the pieces of concrete with steel reinforcing bars stabbed into the floor at the side.

The seemingly durable piece of the building broke into even smaller rubble, together with its steel foundation. The piece of rubble flew out like a bullet, chopping down the only remaining streetlight.

"Damn it, don't screw with me… I'll let you know that there are some things that I won't stand for…"

Looking at his enraged brother, Ren shivered in fear. He was wholeheartedly glad that Kazuma's fury was not directed at him.

"Hmph… So he's here? Ren, run from here."

Sensing the approaching enemy, Kazuma gave his orders to Ren.

"Nii… Nii-sama…"

"Don't worry. There's only one enemy, and there's no room for you in this battle. Just wait in that corner over there. I'll come for you once this is over."

"You… You are sure to win, right? Nii-sama?"

"Leave it to me. Your brother is invincible!"

Without even turning his head, Kazuma gave Ren a thumbs-up as wind surrounded his body and lifted him into the sky. Ren watched the back view of his confident brother with absolute trust.

Seeing the batch of youki surrounding the enemy right before his eyes, Kazuma felt endless fear. A youma of this level should be locked in the deepest depths of Hell. And, even if it wasn't, it should not be released onto the surface.

But Kazuma did not reveal these thoughts. He spoke in a very natural manner.

"Hi, thanks for your kind hospitality a while ago… I believe this is the first time I've met you in person?"

That thing remained silent. Even if it couldn't talk, its attitude could not be more obvious. Even a novice would recognize the killing intent that it gave off, an aura so cold that it gave the illusion of trapping him in an ice cavern.

(Strike before it does!!)

Kazuma fired a gust of powerful wind without warning. He did not go easy on the youma. In fact, he could not go easy on him. With an intent of maintaining his relentless attack until the enemy was destroyed, he continuously released gusts of wind.

The reaction from his opponent instantly changed. An ominous aura made Kazuma immediately shift to the side at top speed. A black wind went through the place where he just was.

Even though he was bounced off by the shockwave, Kazuma knew the true identity of the black wind.

A wind with the strength to push back Kazuma's wind, and with an aura that spelled certain death… there could be no doubt.

"Such unorthodoxy…"

The enemy was clearly stronger than Kazuma. But even so, Kazuma could not just give in. As a practitioner, there was no room for such unorthodoxy to exist.

(Should I reveal my true strength…? After all, Ren already knows…)

The moment he made his decision, Ren's screams reached Kazuma's ears.

"Wahhh! Nii… Nii-sama! Nii-"

"Ren!? Damn it!"

The cut-off scream disrupted Kazuma's concentration, something that the opponent was quick to take advantage of. A black wind graced past Kazuma's throat. If he had not noticed it in time, his head would have undoubtedly separated from his body.

Pressing on the wound on his throat, Kazuma was shocked.

(How can there be a second person here…? This should not be possible- Ah!)

Kazuma had completely forgotten. The black wind not only does not obey Kazuma's will, it could even hide others in its presence.

This was a careless mistake that could not be forgiven, as the ambusher was now retreating, taking Ren with him.

But Kazuma could not give chase, because if he did not keep up with the monster in front of him, he was sure to die. Understanding that all the more, Kazuma could not take any action.

"Damn it! Ren, stay alive!"

Kazuma removed Ren from his mind, and concentrated on eliminating the foe before him.

The wind began to shine with an azure glow. The black wind retreated as though it was fearful of that glow.

(I'm going to kill you!)

As Kazuma gathered the azure wind into a usable power…

That thing lifted the edges of its lips into a smirk, and then, disappeared right before Kazuma's stunned eyes.

"…!!"

Kazuma raised his head to look higher into the sky. Even though he knew that the enemy was flying upwards at a high speed, he had no way of catching

up. Nor could he use his wind to follow. Ren's presence had completely vanished by now, too.

"I was completely toyed with…"

Kazuma mumbled faintly, and then descended away from the battlefield-like ruins of the hotel.

(Wait for me, Ren! I will definitely save you!)

Kazuma put on a completely clueless expression as he walked past the police and fire-fighters who were gathered, mixing himself into the crowds.

Chapter 4: Returning To Visit, And Then—

Part 1

Just as he came within ten meters of the front door…

"Ka-Kazuma!?"

With displeasure, Kazuma glared at the guardsman who was screaming in shock.

(Too slow.)

He mumbled in his heart.

Even though they're on high alert, they only now realized that I arrived? They're beyond useless.

However, the speedy reaction of the other party was worthier of praise! Upon hearing the guardsman's shout, every practitioner that was spread out across the area rushed over one by one.

Within seconds, at least ten Enjutsu practitioners surrounded Kazuma.

"Let me meet the Suzerain."

Kazuma arrogantly commanded, completely ignoring the killing intent coming from all directions.

"We've already come out to get the door. You should be grateful."

(Looks like these guys want to pick a fight with me.)

Even though Kazuma knew that the other party was taunting him, he did not want to bear with it at all. He became furious.

Ever since he came back to Japan, he came across a series of unhappy events. First of all, he was dragged into the fight between the Kannagi clan and the mystery man, then he fell into the mystery man's trap and watched helplessly as Ren was abducted. Faced with the task of reporting Ren's abduction, he had no choice but to force himself to come to the Kannagi household, which he had sworn never to come close to ever again.

All of this had stressed Kazuma's nerves, and it showed on his face as extreme annoyance. He just wanted to find someone to beat up, no matter who it was.

And now, it just so happened that there were a bunch of idiots conveniently waiting in rows as if saying "Please punch me". There was no reason to give up the opportunity.

One of the idiots stood out to break the stalemate. He might have been someone that Kazuma used to know, but at the moment, Kazuma had no intention of identifying any of them.

"At a time like this, you think you can stand in front of us and beg for mercy?!"

As he spoke, it seemed like he was trying to control his fury with all his might.

Hoping to save even a bit of time, Kazuma slowly opened his mouth and said,

"I said to summon the Suzerain… But is anyone listening to me?"

"You bastard!!!"

Crrackk!

The shouting practitioner began angrily throwing fireballs, but at that instant, Kazuma attacked him like a giant using an uppercut punch, making a sound like a blunt object striking a wall. Kazuma's attacker flew into the air, his chin shattering into pieces. He lost the strength to even open his mouth, only being able to spit out blood mixed with broken teeth.

None of the other Enjutsu practitioners had seen Kazuma's attack. They began to retreat in disbelief, in-

stinctively fearful of this attack method that they had never seen before. However, even as they realized this, the battle had already begun, so they started to collect their fighting spirit.

Of course, Kazuma had not intended to fight. It just seemed that someone inside him was repeatedly saying that the world would be better off if all those idiots died. Kazuma allowed that voice to persuade him, forgetting the purpose of his visit in the process.

"Fist of Air" …Blocks of air that are highly compressed and sent forth at the speed of sound. The instant before contact, the wind compresses almost hundredfold and, after pointing to a certain direction, instantaneously expands to its original state like a spring, hitting the target with unbelievable strength that easily surpasses a professional boxer's finishing blow.

The Enjutsu practitioners were helpless as one after another was knocked down.

Kazuma threw out a string of continuing combos, throwing air bombs without regards to accuracy as long as they flew in the general direction of his targets. They even ended up unearthing the surface and frac-

turing the wall. The people that had been standing were completely knocked down and left helpless on the ground.

Kazuma's hands were still resting in the pockets of his leather jacket. People that were able to stand up against him were nowhere to be found.

The practitioners were spread out across the ground. Some had broken lower jaws, some had sunken noses that continuously spewed out blood, and some were moaning about with serious internal damage. They laid around in various positions, none able to continue fighting.

Even though Kazuma didn't even need 30 seconds to take out the practitioners, he did not show an ounce of arrogance. He simply accepted the landslide difference in strength, passing off his victory as a logical certainty.

However, his expression unexpectedly became pensive.

"…Crap…"

Unable to find even a single unharmed victim, Kazuma realized that he had committed a deadly mistake.

"I thought carefully and spoke clearly to these people so that something like this wouldn't happen…"

A phone call ahead of time would have probably accomplished his goal. Also, there was no need to talk directly with the Suzerain. Even if they had suddenly met, Kazuma wouldn't have been able to find anything to say. This time, it was only because Ren had been captured in front of his own eyes, clouding his judgment. And also…

"Also, I wanted to come back after all, huh?"

This place was what I called home in the past. I thought I had already abandoned this place, and yet here I am.

Kazuma shook his head, interrupting his thought pattern fearing that pondering any deeper would unearth quite an unhappy answer.

"Hey, wake up. Don't fall asleep on me!"

Kazuma yelled and kicked an inexperienced practitioner, attempting to distract his mood. However, the practitioner weakly opened his eyes, slowly closing them as he became conscious of the pain coming from his injuries. He simply allowed Kazuma to do as he liked.

"…Damn it!"

Kazuma abhorrently threw away his victim. He then went straight for the door without caring whether he stepped on the ground or a practitioner.

The door was already open, since the people that came out through it had already been defeated. And beyond the door was an area where twice as many Enjutsu practitioners were waiting. The moment Kazuma walked through the door, he was met with almost thirty lines of fire.

Honng!

The enormous heat transformed into plasma and completely surrounded Kazuma, emitted enough light to burn even the eyes. The attacking practitioners had their moment of glory.

(We killed him!)

(If we did this much and he's still not dead…)

(…No human could survive that!)

Suddenly, in the dissipating fire, they saw something they couldn't believe.

"Wh, What?"

Kazuma was standing safely inside the white flames that were tinted with blue and green.

"So boring…"

Kazuma lazily waved his hand, extinguishing the collected strength of thirty flames. Not even a hair on Kazuma's head was harmed.

"Impossible… Is that guy a youma god…?"

The practitioners were so shocked that they apparently even forgot how to breathe. If they had looked calmly, they might have been able to see the thin layer of air that separated Kazuma and the flames.

High-level practitioners could even surpass the laws of physics. Whether it was an Enjutsu or a Fuujutsu practitioner, igniting a fire without using oxygen or blocking the heat transferred in the air was most certainly possible.

Kazuma had complete control of the air inside this space. His will was stronger than the laws of physics so, no matter how large the amount of heat there was, it could not be transferred into Kazuma's body.

The requirements to become a first rate practitioner was not the strength of their spells, nor knowledge, nor technique, but willpower. The willpower to deny the present reality and construct his own fantasy world.

Jutsu, or magic, is based on mixing willpower into "Initial Principle" and creating new laws to control the effects. The constructed system of the world is re-written, and the new laws are changed into reality.

In other words, in order to make the flames reach Kazuma, the Enjutsu practitioner would need a stronger will than what Kazuma employed to deny the laws of physics. Basically, what is needed is to use an even stronger will to deny his fabricated laws. Nothing will be achieved if the practitioner does not have enough determination of burning Kazuma to surpass Kazuma's refusal of being burned.

Since nothing was achieved in this case, Kazuma's will was most likely stronger than the combined will of the thirty practitioners.

"Impossible… impossible…"

The practitioners mumbled, staring with shock.

It ought to be said that they can only mumble.

They understood the reasons for their ineffective spell. In fact, they understood it very well, the same way they understood things such as arms and legs.

Of course, they did not consider Kazuma's existence as something beyond common sense. They only

considered him as a first-class Fuujutsu practitioner, and consequently, believed that Kazuma simply commanded a huge wind spirit.

Kazuma's strength had already surpassed what they previously considered, completely achieving another dimension. The difference was clear.

Kazuma didn't counterattack these practitioners, though. It was obviously not to forgive them, but simply that, from the start, he wanted to ignore the practitioners from the branch families.

Because of the practitioners, Kazuma began to recall the eighteen years he spent in this mansion. They were memories of a home that contained almost no happiness. No matter who it was, everyone disregarded him almost to the point of ignoring his existence. Inside such an excessive clan, there was hardly anyone who kindly accepted him.

But no matter what kind of persecution Kazuma received, he still began to feel homesickness. After all, it was the place of his roots.

(That's right… I came back here…)

Kazuma could only admit this thought. Even though he was looked down upon and bullied, he was

still protected here. He was shielded from society and from the responsibilities of living alone.

However, yearning for someone to protect him was weakness, escapism, and, to put it simply, running away from reality.

Even though Kazuma admitted that his weakness, which he should have had already abandoned four years ago, still lingered within him, this was something that made him depressed.

(In the end, I can't allow this home to continue existing…)

Kazuma was assaulted by large amounts of unhappiness, and stubbornly began blaming the roots of his evils on the Kannagi main family. He came to the decision of crushing it with his own hands.

Hearing Kazuma's will, an even bigger wind spirit appeared. A wind pressure that could challenge a typhoon began condensing within his palm.

If he released all of it, everything within 200 meters would be destroyed in a blink of an eye. Seeing this, the practitioners already prepared for death.

Kazuma completely forgot about the Kannagi clan or anyone living close by. His only thought was to erase the annoying things right in front of his eyes.

Even Kazuma himself did not notice the large amount of pressure that he accumulated. He was indulged in such self-satisfied thoughts that he was not properly regulating his power.

"Wo… Wah…!"

"What, what is this strength?!"

No matter what they did, the practitioners had no way of understanding Kazuma's thoughts. They stood stupidly in the face of such crushing strength, without even thinking of defending with jutsu.

This was clearly within reason. The wind spirits that Kazuma summoned were enough to eradicate the mansion, whether released as a jutsu or as an out-of-control rampage.

"…"

The older practitioners exchanged glances without speaking. They had more experience, so they weren't as stunned. Being exposed to Juugo when he was a young boy, they were already familiar with out-of-control spirits that could be categorized as natural dis-

asters. Although, at that time, they felt that they would be protected by that extreme strength.

After making an enormous inner determination, they realized that there was only one way to defend against the attack that Kazuma was preparing.

They would gamble their lives to perform a summoning of massive proportions, which could result in a mutual suicide. But they had already prepared for death.

(If only to protect the Suzerain…)

(Before Ayano-sama returns…)

There was no reason for them to gamble their lives other than to try to defeat Kazuma. After all, if Kazuma was standing here, then Genma was probably already defeated.

In that case, only Ayano had the ability to fight on par with Kazuma. With that in mind, the practitioners decided to gamble their lives in order to gain time for Ayano's return.

"Let's go…"

"Hold it right there."

A calm voice detained them just before they attacked. The voice's immense power stopped everyone in their tracks.

Time may have frozen for a moment, since nobody moved for a while. During that time, the only audible sound was the bamboo hitting the stone.

"Suz-Suzerain!"

"It's too dangerous! Please withdraw!"

All of the practitioners recommended the Suzerain to withdraw.

Despite everyone having their eyes on him, Juugo walked with ease while continuing to look at Kazuma.

Kazuma also met Juugo's eyes.

Juugo had always been very gentle with Kazuma, always speaking with feelings of loving concern instead of scolding with strict words. During Kazuma's teenage years when he was surrounded by hostility, only his time with Juugo allowed him relief.

To Kazuma, Juugo was similar to an admirable father, in contrast to Genma who only gave him terror.

A kind of ancient yearning surged forth. However, even if Kazuma wanted to cry, tears would not come out.

Apparently, Juugo completely understood Kazuma's feelings. Speaking as if to a relative he had not seen in a long time, Juugo greeted Kazuma.

"Long time no see, Kazuma. How are you doing?"

"…Ahh"

Knowing that Juugo still believed in him, Kazuma laughed as if he was being released from confinement.

Juugo laughed energetically as well. Seeing the typhoon in Kazuma's hand, he said,

"If it's like that, then, what's in your hand?"

"Huh? Oh, just trying to surpass the past."

Kazuma clumsily waved his hand, dismissing all of the accumulated spirits. He even forgot the customary etiquette of saying 'thank you' to all of the spirits.

"Huh? Um, ok… It's hard to talk while standing here, so come in for cup of tea."

Juugo could not have thoroughly understood what Kazuma had meant, so he merely treated the words as neglected mumblings.

The practitioners stood as if force fed muting pills, simply watching Juugo's light conversation with Kazuma. They probably thought that Kazuma would make a sneak attack with his back turned.

"Su-Suzerain, Kazuma is a traitor!"

Juugo glanced sadly at the still incompetent practitioners. He then slowly turned around to face Kazuma and asked,

"Uh, is it like that?"

"…No?"

Kazuma said with a shrug. The bunch of idiots continued their puzzled stares, unable to speak despite having working mouths.

"So it seems."

"No, we can't trust him!"

The practitioners shouted with dissatisfaction, believing that Juugo was being deceived.

"Calm down, you idiots!"

Juugo scolded, sighing. He continued,

"If Kazuma was serious, you would all be dead. Now do you understand?"

The practitioners all looked towards Kazuma and his careless appearance. The power that could annihilate them was completely gone. It could not be disputed that this once useless man returned as a superior, first-class practitioner.

"…Say, why did you return? It couldn't have just been for a gathering, right?"

"Ah, that's right. There's something I need to tell you."

Kazuma finally remembered the reason for his visit, although it was very humiliating to admit to someone else that Ren was captured under his watch.

(Can't be helped, I guess. After all, losing the initiative was my fault.)

"…Ren has been abducted. The culprit was someone who can use the wind, most likely an accomplice of the murderer that killed your comrades."

"Quit joking! You were the one who killed Shinji and Shingo!"

The Soushu of the Yuuki family came forward, speaking to Kazuma for the first time.

(It doesn't matter who dies as long as it's not your sons?)

For an instant, the man had an urge to say that, but he managed to keep it to himself. After all, he wasn't someone worthy of attention.

"Ren was seized?"

Juugo also ignored Yuuki's words and questioned Kazuma to know if he was killed.

"That's right. I'm not too sure about the details, but I know that he's still alive. Don't know why, though. I came here to inform you guys, but could it be that you already know who did it?"

"No, not yet. But thank you for the information."

Juugo seemed to think of something as his face turned bitter. He said something to the man standing at his side. Kazuma tried hard to remember, and recalled that this was a man trusted by Juugo.

That man bowed, and quickly departed from the house.

"Did you see what that person looked like?"

"…Yeah, but I don't think it'll help at all. That thing isn't even human."

Just thinking about him brought chills to Kazuma, since the irregular youma ki that 'it' possessed could not have been from anything human.

"I see… By the way, what happened to Genma?"

Juugo's question made Kazuma sincerely laugh. Rather than that of a grown man, his laugh was more of a teenage boy's. His grin wasn't something that could be achieved from practicing. It was a mischievous grin that completely covered his face.

Kazuma showed his thumb and turned it down. With his chin moving backwards, he bragged,

"I kicked his ass."

"Huh, haha, hahahahahahaha! So you kicked his ass, huh?"

Juugo laughed uncontrollably, an unstoppable roaring laughter, at Kazuma's overly energetic and carefree reply.

"Suzerain! This is not a funny matter!"

The practitioners worriedly admonished the Suzerain's unstopping laughter.

"Hmm, I suppose it isn't."

Juugo pulled his face back to a severe, unyielding and steady stare. He then asked Kazuma,

"Don't tell me you killed him?"

"Nah, I felt like being merciful. I even called an ambulance! Quite kind of me!"

"If that's the case, then it's alright."

"Absolutely not!"

The person interrupting Juugo was like the practitioner from before. He became so angry that he started to stagger as if he was dizzy.

"If you're not feeling well, you can withdraw."

"My situation is of no importance! If Kazuma knocked out Genma-sama, then it is absolutely certain that he is rebelling!"

"…This is just a father-son argument."

"This… Something like this is…!"

"Understood. I just went over this. Okay, you can withdraw."

Juugo disrupted the person's words, gesturing at Kazuma as he left through the door. Kazuma followed suit.

And so, after four years, Kazuma finally returned to the place where he was born.

Part 2

Kazuma slowly observed the mansion that he had not walked through for four years. Like the exterior, the interior of the mansion did not change at all. It was constructed during the Warring States Period, and a mere four years was not enough for any changes.

Kazuma continued behind Juugo, following without speaking as he was taken to Juugo's private room.

"We can talk normally here. What would you like to drink?"

"It doesn't matter. Besides, I'm not thirsty…"

Listening to Kazuma's casual reply, Juugo stared at Kazuma as if searching for something.

"Hm… Don't you trust me?"

"It's not that I suspect you."

Suddenly, a discordant atmosphere began to fill the room.

After all, there wasn't a single reason for the Kannagi clan to believe Kazuma. Apart from Juugo, everyone believed him to be the murderer.

It was really unbelievable for Kazuma to appear in the home of the enemies pursuing his life.

"Why did you leave the house?"

Juugo broke the silence. More than anything else, this was what he wanted to hear about the most.

"When I heard that you were disowned, you had already left without a single word. Am I that untrustworthy?"

"Ah… Actually, I didn't think of that. At that time, I just wanted to leave the Kannagi clan without delay. Both Otou-san and Okaa-san said that there was no other choice."

"What did Miyuki say?"

This was the first time Juugo heard that Kazuma had seen his mother before leaving home.

"Now that I think about it, I was so foolish. Rather than going to you, I was requested by that woman to apologize… To think, I still believed that my parents cared."

Kazuma crooked his mouth, ridiculing himself of the past.

Rather than hating Miyuki, it was about him being so foolish. He thought that things like ties of blood and motherhood would help him.

"What did Miyuki… say?"

Kazuma was brought back to that day, four years ago. Juugo's voice barely reached Kazuma, as if it was coming from a distant place.

When Kazuma first entered his mother's room, he couldn't calm down, constantly waiting for his mother's reply.

In contrast, Miyuki was sitting opposite Kazuma with a tranquil attitude as if she was completely unaffected. She was showing the same composure that she would when idly chatting.

Although it felt like an eternal silence, in reality, not even a single minute had passed. She finally opened her mouth towards the son that came to her for help.

"Kazuma, your education was very good. Your physical education was also quite above normal. The teacher from the school even praised you!"

"Oka, Okaa-san…"

Miyuki's words crushed Kazuma's hopes. To think that Genma had requested her to do something like…!

"Such a pity. If only you had the talent for Enjutsu, I could have treated you as a worthy son, with deep love and concern."

To do something like… bidding farewell.

Kazuma realized that Miyuki constantly discussed events as if they were in the past, and that for her, everything was over. She accepted her son being disowned as a reality that could not be changed. She didn't need a useless son, and so she didn't hesitate to abandon him.

"Okaa-san…"

Facing her son who was begging for help in a quaking voice, Miyuki smiled and handed him a card.

"There is ten million inside. It's not a lot, but it can still fulfill your life's needs. Don't get sick, and stay alive energetically."

Those were already words of departure. Kazuma, as if escaping, fled to his room afterwards. The next day, without taking anything, he left home by himself. It seemed like nobody even noticed his departure.

The reason he left Japan was not because of some firm determination to live independently and alone.

He was afraid. Afraid that his parents would become heartless monsters even more terrifying than youma and say "I don't need useless things".

He wanted to hide in a place where they could never find him. Even though he knew that they would not send people after him, his body did not seem to understand, simply running as far as it could.

When he finally arrived at Hong Kong, Kazuma was finally able to unwind for the first time. But back then, he could never had known of the tragedy that was about to take place.

"Ahh, it's probably like that."

"…"

Juugo said nothing, merely burying his head in deep thought.

This woman always did things her own way… But I can't believe she was this cruel…

"Oh well, don't be bothered by it. It's all in the past now."

"…You've become strong, Kazuma."

Juugo spoke deeply. To think that a simple youth who was a mere pronoun four years ago became an outstanding man that possessed great power and the

mental strength to control that power. Juugo felt very happy.

Though he praised Kazuma from the bottom of his heart for accomplishing this feat, the most important thing right now was to clear Kazuma's name. Everything would begin from now.

"…I can't agree with you."

"Is it still not enough? Why do you desire power so much?"

Juugo asked, using a somewhat criticizing tone. Contrary to what he had thought, Kazuma did not seem very satisfied with his power.

However, Kazuma had clearly not fallen into some drunken pursuit of power. Instead, he was like a lost and desperate youth trying to find a place to repose.

"Yeah, I did become stronger… and don't cry anymore. But… even if I had to sell my soul to the devil, it wouldn't be a problem, because I absolutely cannot allow myself to remain weak."

Kazuma said while hiding his head, with two arms encircling his raised knee.

He could still clearly remember that day, when he was crying feebly with his pupils frozen by hopeless-

ness and horror. He would never forget it in all his years.

(I couldn't do anything…)

No matter what kind of crazy, assiduous training he went through, no matter how many times he pushed himself to the brink of death, it was impossible to return to that moment. He couldn't save… her.

"Why do you desire power so much?"

Kazuma could not answer that question.

Is it so you can prevent such tragedies from happening again?

Is it so you can protect better this time?

No.

Those kinds of ideas could not satisfy him. She could never return… since she was locked in the bottom of hell.

"Why do you desire power so much?"

(I don't know!)

There was no reason, no purpose, that he could give. It was simply because he had the ability to command the wind spirits, an ability that would never blossom within the Kannagi family.

"Why do you desire power so much?"

"…I wanted to protect…"

Kazuma muttered, as if squeezing out toothpaste. In the end, he still could not say anything, because he still could not overcome it. One day, however, he will surely discover the real meaning of power…

Juugo didn't say anything, merely watching Kazuma quietly.

("…I wanted to protect…")

Juugo did not know much about Kazuma's past. All he could do was to imagine what that unfulfilled promise could have meant, and imagine the pain that Kazuma was going through.

"Oh yeah, after this is all over, let's find a day to have a drink together! You can choose the place."

Even so, Juugo could at least be a listener to his complaints! If Kazuma could spit out all of the unhappiness accumulated within his heart, he just might be able to gain some tranquility. Juugo hoped that he could help his "son" as a "father", even if the result turns out to be insignificant.

"…Hmm… alright."

Kazuma hid the scar that was bleeding to this day and gave a gentle smile.

Part 3

"Suzerain, I have the information you wanted."

A voice suddenly came in from the other side of the pull door. Juugo immediately gave him permission to enter.

The person who entered was the man that was previously commanded by Juugo to go do something. He had a folder in his hand.

"It's this one."

"Hm…"

Juugo accepted the file and slowly opened it. He passed the information onto Kazuma.

"I only have a 10 year old picture… But is this person the culprit?"

"…Yeah, that's right."

Kazuma replied immediately after seeing the photo accompanying the information. This shounen, over ten years, had added the ki of a youma to himself and turned into a monster whose mere presence could send shivers down the back.

(Wait. In other words, that thing used to be human?)

"Is that so? Go detain all the Fuuga clan members, quickly!"

"Understood!"

Juugo eyed Kazuma while he was still looking at the photo, then gave commands to the assistant. The assistant's entire being immediately disappeared, simply vanishing without a trace.

"That person… Just what kind of person is he?"

Kazuma looked at the spot where Juugo's assistant was standing just a moment ago. How the person moved was a mystery to him.

"My attendant, didn't you know?"

"No… uh… I guess it doesn't really matter."

Juugo quietly smiled to himself at being able to surprise Kazuma. Kazuma decided to give up on the matter.

Kazuma moved his eyes back onto the file and discovered that there was one name written it: Kazamaki Ryuuya.

(…Kazamaki?)

That was the last name of the Fuuga captain.

"This thing is Hyoue's son. Around ten years ago he fell ill. During his recovery, I have not seen him even once."

"So that's how it is? Rebellion? Gah, you tormented them too much."

Based on Kazuma's knowledge, although the Fuuga clan was described as a subordinate organization of the Kannagi clan, they were really no different from slaves. That was the most likely reason for the rebellion.

"Maybe it is like that."

Juugo's voice became very grave. Such things as rebellions were much more problematic compared to attacks from exterior enemies. Unfortunately, as a suzerain, having such a headache was part of the job.

On another note, for Kazuma, this was completely someone else's problem. No matter what the problem was, there is no connection with him. The first and only thing that came to his mind was how to rescue Ren. Whether or not the Kannagi clan survived did not concern him.

"Then, why did the Fuuga clan kidnap Ren? As a hostage, his value is quite insignificant."

Although Ren was from the main family of the Kannagi clan, his existence was not irreplaceable. Arguably, if it was Ayano, the successor of the Enraiha, it would be another story, but using Ren as a hostage wouldn't force the Kannagi clan to move carelessly nor act rashly.

"He is not being held as a hostage… but as a living sacrifice!"

"…A living sacrifice!?"

Kazuma's face became red with rage as old scars were suddenly torn anew.

…Her maroon hair dyed red by fresh blood… Her deep green eyes, which were once overflowing with life, now blurred like old glass marbles… Lips that seem to create songs would never open again…

"You… Can you protect me?"

(Rin…!)

Kazuma tightly clenched his fists. The pain from forcing his fingernails to break skin pulled him back to reality.

(Forget it! Even if it's just for this moment…!)

Kazuma, whose breath was filled with frustration, punched the floor with his fist, which was dripping blood.

"Sorry, I interrupted you, please continue…"

Suddenly, Kazuma stopped talking and looked through the window towards the outside. Juugo also turned to look in the same direction, though his reaction was late by a couple of seconds. They noticed the ki of fire spirits that were increasing explosively.

"Ayano…?"

After walking close to the window and seeing Kazuma's form, Ayano's posture instantly changed as she jumped directly in through the window while holding onto Enraiha with one hand.

"Kazuma!!"

After visually confirming Kazuma's position, Ayano shouted and raised the Enraiha to the Jodan no Kamae position.

Without any doubts or hesitation, she swung downwards without paying any attention to the surrounding environment. This kind of quick and decisive decision making is worthy of praise!

"Woah…"

Kazuma, surprised by this sneak attack, reacted a couple of seconds late. But that was already a deadly delay. Even though he instantly constructed a kekkai, for it to receive a plasma attack surpassing a thousand degrees…

(Damn, not enough!)

The number of wind spirits was absolutely inadequate.

When interfering with "Initial Principle", practitioners are to use the spirits within their control to alter the environment.

In order to do that, a large number of spirits or spirits with enough strength must be gathered. If the accumulated spirits do not have enough power, then no matter how strong one's will is, it is still impossible to realize the desired defense.

No matter how strong the will, it can not transform into real power if there are no spirits, as the spirits are a medium to transmit their will to the world. No matter how much a person will try to curse another, it is impossible to kill that person merely by thinking bad ills upon them. It can only be done by accumulating enough spirits to produce an effect.

The scorching plasma instantly severed the kekkai. The branch families could not even compare to this power that came like the arrival of the sun. No matter how fast Kazuma could summon, there was no way he could create a strong enough kekkai in such a short time.

The kekkai that appeared outside the room was instantly destroyed, allowing the plasma to come in contact with the glass of the window. Unable to withstand getting sandwiched between two powerful attacks of wind and fire, the window frame, and even the wall surrounding it, began to weather down and collapse.

(Shit! I'm going to get stabbed!)

Just when Kazuma thought he was about to die…

"Huh!?"

A fierce ki emerged, extinguishing the plasma about to vaporize Kazuma and erasing it without leaving a trace, as if it were only a dream.

"Quite powerful◎ "

Kazuma quietly praised Juugo. After all, Juugo not only seized the spirits under Ayano's control, he even completely sent them away with his powerful ki.

It really was willpower beyond that of a normal person. Although he had already retired from the front line, the power that had been proclaimed as the strongest in history had not diminished in the slightest.

"Otou, Otou-san?"

She didn't know exactly why, but Ayano sensed that Juugo wasn't very happy with her actions. As if searching for an opportunity to flee, she bent back while retreating.

Unfortunately, that chance never came.

"You fool!!!"

Juugo's roar had the potential to punch through a body.

"Ah!"

Ayano fearfully rolled into a ball like a little child.

Juugo's roar proved to have impossibly massive power. It was so loud that it shook the walls that survived Ayano's first attack and shattered any remaining glass.

"You idiot daughter! How many times have I told you not to swing that sword around without thinking?! Why can't you understand that the one who

holds the Enraiha should not casually and carelessly use strength?! At least have some intellect to accompany that strength! Idiot!"

"Ah…"

Ayano couldn't continue standing. Faced with the heartless reproach from her father, who was almost always very gentle and kind, she was so shocked that she fell towards the garden with her butt on the ground. Her eyes began to grow moist as if about to cry.

Juugo faced Kazuma again, apologizing for his daughter's reckless behavior,

"Sorry, my daughter did something disrespectful, very sorry… hmm?" Kazuma, who was standing there just a moment ago, was not found. Noticing something, Juugo looked downwards, seeing Kazuma covering his ears with both hands.

"What are you doing…?"

Juugo asked a surprising question.

Kazuma replyed with a hoarse voice,

"Nothing… Just, next time you roar like that, please warn me. You scared me half to death…"

Ayano, who was several meters away, only felt a loud voice that rattled the bones. However, Kazuma, who was right in front of Juugo, was struck by shockwaves rather than a shout. Although his ear membrane was stunned, his brain was still ringing from the powerful waves that penetrated his entire body.

"…Even my brain feels like its splitting."

Kazuma stood up shakily. Though his brain was still ringing from the reverberations comparable to a percussion instrument, he ignored it with his willpower.

"Let's continue, please ignore that idiot daughter."

Kazuma said, sitting down at the same spot without moving. Trying to continue standing wasn't very easy as the ossicles in his ears were still numb.

"…No, it's just that Ayano doesn't know what's going on. Let her listen, it will be easier for me."

After a slight hesitation, Juugo called Ayano over. Ayano gave thanks to Enraiha and hung it in a crevice on the wall. She came closer to Juugo, bowing and lowering her head.

"…Ayano."

"I'm very sorry."

Ayano immediately pressed herself onto the ground and bowed. She was not really sure about what was going on, but she preemptively selected this action to apologize.

"…That's enough, in the future, just pay more attention!"

Juugo did not want to repeat this topic as right now was not the time for it.

"Listen closely, Ayano. The guilty one isn't Kazuma. It's the Fuuga clan!"

"Fuuga? What can weak people like them do…?"

Juugo glared at the interrupting Ayano, telling her to be quiet.

"The culprit was Kazamaki Ryuuya, or more accurately, the youma who possesses him."

"It doesn't matter who or what did it. What's this about Ren becoming a living sacrifice?"

Kazuma hurried the topic. Obviously, Ayano interrupted again.

"What? Ren was captured?"

"You shut up!"

Juugo and Kazuma accidentally but perfectly spoke at the same time. Ayano pouted unhappily, but

given her recent disrespectful actions and behavior, her current situation was in a very weak light. Without any better ideas, she decided she could only sit there quietly and listen.

"Then, continuing where we left off: The ancestors of the Fuuga and Kannagi clan started out doing completely different things…"

(Of course.)

Kazuma mumbled to himself. Wind and fire had different strengths and characteristics. Since the two were now the same clan, the most likely explanation was that the Kannagi clan ended up absorbing the Fuuga clan.

"Some 300 years ago, the Fuuga clan was proud of themselves for being able to manipulate strong and powerful wind. They created a shadow organization that thrived off of wealth gained from assassinating, cheating, and doing destructive jobs. They would do any job, no matter what it was, but as it turned out, too many of them were evil deeds. Eventually, the Kannagi clan was given a direct order from the Shogunate to eliminate them.

At the final period of the strenuous battle, our ancestors managed to seal Fuuga's source of power, and decided to absorb what was left of the Fuuga clan, who had lost most of their powers, as followers."

"What's the source of their power?"

"…It's God!"

Although Juugo's reply was quick and simple, the meaning of his words were a bit more complicated.

"God…!"

Kazuma glanced at Ayano, who gasped sharply. Although he himself was also surprised, due to Ayano's earlier wavering, Kazuma decided to allow the room to return to tranquility before speaking.

"How would we seal something like that?"

Kazuma's question was not without reason. After all, to a human, sealing a god was something pretty much impossible to do.

What was mentioned as God is not the divine creator that religion adheres to - Rather, it is a general term for something or someone that surpasses all existence. Surpassing mankind is the basis of a god's status, and for one to be defeated by mankind would contradict

the definition. “A human sealing God” is a contradictory phrase in itself.

“This kind of situation is only passed down through oral stories told throughout the generations. What really happened, I do not know… They probably had to borrow from the King of Spirits, or else such a thing would be impossible.”

The King of Spirits is quite simply the king of all spirits: The one who governs the existence of all spirits on this planet. Although it is speculated that there exists a King for earth, water, fire, and wind, no one has been able to determine whether they all exist.

About a thousand years ago, the first suzerain of the Kannagi clan and the King of Fire Spirits were able to achieve a covenant, and the Enraiha was gifted. Then, due to blood relationships, the Kannagi clan received the ability to greatly perceive the power of the fire spirits. Or so the legend goes.

Truly, if you had the power of the King of the Spirits, then it would not be impossible to seal a god…

“But even if the suzerain 300 years ago could make another contract with the King of Spirits, there aren’t many humans who can use such power. You can’t

surpass a god. Couldn't they have directly summoned the King of Spirits?"

"…Something like that is impossible, isn't it?"

Having a king that exists in the upper world descend onto this world can only be described as a miracle that surpasses common sense. Even in theory, it would still be impossible. So, given Ayano's question, Kazuma coldly replied,

"What would happen? It doesn't matter. I can't achieve such a miracle."

"We already knew that a long time ago!"

"Anyway, so Hyoue's motive is to revive that god?"

Kazuma gritted his teeth and continued to ignore Ayano, hurrying Juugo to continue explaining.

"Most likely, the way of sealing is passed down in secret throughout the generations of suzerains. If they started a rebellion, then that means they probably found the location of the seal, as well as the method to remove it."

As Juugo said this, he became more impatient. After all, if the sealed god were to be released, then the Fuuga clan would obtain strength comparable to that

of the Kannagi clan. Also, it is undeniable that the wrath of the sealed god would descend upon them.

"…So, Ren will become a tribute to revive the god."

Kazuma was pretty calm given the situation. After all, he did not have any obligations to help in the survival or destruction of the Kannagi clan. If things were to really turn out that way, he could just run away. Running away was something Kazuma had absolute confidence in.

"No, in order to remove the seal, Ren is necessary… Or rather, anyone from the main branch of the Kannagi clan is necessary."

After stopping Kazuma, Juugo continued to speak,

"Only someone from the main branch can remove the seal, because the seal is inside the Samadhi Flame."

The Samadhi Flame is the crystallization of an absolutely untainted flame. It is a pure flame that should not even exist in this world. Anything that comes in contact with it will be vaporized without a trace, no matter what it is.

In order to send away such a thing, it is necessary to come in contact with the origin of the seal. Clearly,

that is impossible without someone from the main branch.

"But, if the fire is in the way, then can't you just blow it away normally? Even if it is a Samadhi Flame, if I can do it, then that guy probably can too."

"The seal is inside the flame."

Juugo repeated what he just said, as if to test Kazuma.

"Then… That means…!"

"That's right, the flame is sealing that god. If it's blown away, then the sealed god's form will also disappear. So, without those protected from fire, removing the seal is impossible."

The suzerain of that time established several layers of security for the seal. The existence of the seal was shrouded in the highest degree of secrecy, and the process of the absorption of the Fuuga clan into the Kannagi clan was erased from memory. For both the Kannagi and Fuuga, it was as if such matters had never even occurred.

The fact that the seal could not be removed by a member of the Fuuga clan was absolutely certain. Otherwise, the shogunate that desired the destruction of

the Fuuga clan probably would not have accepted the results.

"If the first thing the released god sees is the descendant of the one who sealed him… I would fear to think about what would happen to Ren."

"So that's how it is… Really, if they had just wiped out the Fuuga clan to begin with, we would not have to go through all of this."

"You… don't you have any compassion for fellow humans?"

Ayano did not hide any of her inner hatred for Kazuma.

"Compassion for fellow humans? You… do you actually think that the Kannagi kindly rescued the Fuuga?"

"Wha-What does that mean?"

"Wind can strengthen fire. Since they're practitioners of lower standards, wouldn't using them as subordinates be more suitable?"

Kazuma's words were obviously directed at Juugo. Since at this point excuses were useless, Juugo decided to tell the truth,

"That's right. Our ancestors used the Fuuga clan as a mere tool… And a very convenient tool at that…"

"No way…"

"Hey, this rebellion is certainly righteous to them, since you guys treat them like slaves. It's justice to get revenge."

"What? Why are you speaking about it as if it was someone else's problem? Ren dying doesn't matter to you?"

Ayano gritted her teeth as she fumed at Kazuma, who bore a sarcastic and unimpressed expression.

"Ren is also a practitioner of the Kannagi clan. There's no way he would obey Hyoue."

"That… it is possible."

"What!?"

Kazuma ignored Ayano, who was ready for a thorough argument, and said to Juugo,

"We haven't passed twelve hours yet so he might be ok, but manipulating him would be quite easy. No matter how talented Ren is, if we let a full day pass, they could probably get him to kill even his own parents."

His calm and direct statement left the two Kannagi at a loss of words.

There are plenty of ways to brainwash or possess someone. Although the strength of the Kannagi clan resides in its lineage, such attributes are practical only to the body. In other words, even when unconscious or possessed by youma, the spirits would still protect Ren's body.

"…If we don't get to the seal in time, there will be no way back. We have to rescue Ren quickly."

"Please work hard!"

Kazuma said disinterestedly as if dousing the flames of Juugo's passionate words.

Ayano furrowed her forehead. People like Kazuma, who have no sense of responsibility, are the ones that she truly hates. To her, rather than the people who just don't have enough power, the ones who are strong enough yet are unwilling to do anything, are the ones who are rotten to the core.

"You don't need to remind me! Even without you, I can handle them! I'll show you!"

"…Wait a minute!"

Juugo constrained his daughter, not because he doubted Ayano's strength, but because, since the situation involved the clan's survival, an abundance of just fighting strength was pointless.

"Kazuma, can you defeat Ryuuya?"

"…Like hell. If I'm lucky, I might last maybe five minutes."

After a slight pause, Kazuma replied honestly. He frequently used an objective self-evaluation method to assess himself. From experience, he had learned that overconfidence was extremely dangerous.

"Is that so…?"

Juugo mentally compared the abilities of the following people: Ryuuya > Kazuma > Genma > Ayano. In other words, Ayano alone had no possibility of winning.

"Well, wherever they summoned such a high level youma from is beyond me. Hell, even the powerful youma ki of the 3000-year old vampire from the interior of China is nothing compared to that thing."

"You, you can even beat… something like that…?"

Juugo was probably more confused than astonished.

"Ha, yeah right! There's no way to fight against that either. I just patted my ass and tucked in my tail, then ran like the wind."

Kazuma mischievously avoided further questioning. Those were memories he did not want to recall, so he diverted the topic back to the original discussion,

"The problem with that guy is that the wind he uses is not normal."

"…What does that mean?"

"It's so abnormal that I have no clue how nature even developed it. The spirits around that guy are all going crazy. Because of this, I can't interfere with his spells - I can't even sense it. If he chooses to hide himself, I won't be able to sense him until just before he comes at us at point blank range."

"That's quite… no, that's really bothersome!"

Juugo worriedly mumbled.

Spirits have wisdom and ability, and although it is unknown how to differentiate them, they also have a will. Therefore, they can get agitated just like a human being.

Putting spirits in a situation that conflicts with its own characteristics for a long period of time, such as

putting fire spirits in water or sealing wind spirits in the ground, will cause them to go crazy. This is a fact that has already been confirmed.

But…

"How would you control that kind of thing?"

Because they have already lost their consciousness, they certainly would not be able to hear the words of a human… probably.

"Who the hell knows? Nothing like this has ever happened before, so there's nothing to compare this situation with!"

Kazuma replied vaguely, and continued,

"To do that… maybe having Ayano fight would work better than trying to pit wind against wind. Since fire is the main attacking force, if she uses the Enraiha to stab him and burn him from the inside out, he'll die no matter how strong his will is."

"Then, are you saying that you will not help?"

"I don't like working."

"I'll pay 100 million!"

"Thanks for the job ◎ "

Kazuma instantly agreed to the contract.

This was not because the huge amount of money blurred his vision. As an outsider, he needed a reason, in the form of payment, to be involved. Of course, he would take what was his, but he had already become determined to join the battle.

"You're terrible! Without money, you would have abandoned your own brother?"

Ayano spat. Kazuma simply grinned without replying.

Rather than being considered a "good guy" who acts by his emotions, being known as a miser makes him feel a lot better. Ayano's scorn did not affect him in any way.

"Then, please."

"Ah, leave it to me."

After glancing at Ayano, who looked like she was about to shoot lasers from her eyes, the two men shook hands in agreement.

Juugo certainly understood Kazuma's intentions. In order for him to have a proper reason to fight, he needed compensation in the form of 100 million yen.

(I really can't beat him…)

Juugo really felt that Kazuma's consideration was not the same as before.

"Then, where exactly is this place?"

By now there was no further need for discussion. Juugo simply replied,

"Kyoto!"

The ceremonial mountain of the fire god laid in northwestern Kyoto. It was a sacred place to the Kannagi clan, the contractual place where the earth held the flames of the burning heavens. At this place containing 300 years of gratitude and grudges, the two clans were gambling their existence - The place of the decisive battle was there.

Chapter 5: Rescue

Part 1

Kazuma and Ayano sat on a wide seat within a side-room, quietly waiting for their arrival in Kyoto via the Shinkansen.

The air conditioning was very pleasant, and the environment was also quite cozy. However, most people preferred squeezing into the over-congested train chambers over sitting in the same room as these two.

The unpleasant atmosphere around them made it difficult to stay in that room.

This is infuriating.

This is so infuriating!

Ayano shot murderous stares straight at Kazuma, who was sitting diagonally across from her.

Even though it was impossible not to notice her, Kazuma did not even look at Ayano. He shook his leg comfortably as he skimmed through a magazine he bought from a stall.

Ayano shifted her view back towards the scenery outside once more.

She currently felt worse than she ever had in her entire life. Having to work together with Kazuma made her very unhappy. Not to mention that her father, Juugo, seemed to have more faith in Kazuma's abilities rather than hers, which agitated her even more.

She stubbornly forced herself to face the window while glancing at Kazuma. From the looks of it, he was completely different from the way he was four years ago. He didn't seem very different to the naked eye, but in her heart, he had already jumped up several levels.

She hated Kazuma very much - she could guarantee that with a fist hitting her chest. However, her eyes just couldn't divert from him. Unknowingly, she had begun to go in pursuit of Kazuma, observing his every move. Ayano would not tolerate such actions.

(Speaking of which, this is totally unbelievable! How did he become so strong in just four years?)

The Kazuma four years ago was just like a stone by the roadside. Rather than bullying or looking down on him, this view was more like the natural action of removing him from sight.

It was the same even during the “Successor Ceremony”. Kazuma joined the ceremony only because Genma forced him to. The match between Kazuma, who could not even use Enjutsu, and Ayano, wasn’t even a fight. After all, everyone knew what the outcome would be even before the ceremony.

(But I heard that his fighting skills and other Jutsu were pretty good… No! Why am I trying to spot his good points!?)

Ayano shook her head fiercely, removing all of her unpleasant thoughts. She organized her breathing and raised her head. At this moment, her eyes met Kazuma.

“…You seem very happy.”

Kazuma was not mocking her. He was simply surprised.

“Who… Who would be happy!? Just being with you annoys me more than anything else!”

“Is that so?”

Kazuma replied lightly. He took out a cigarette from a hidden pocket in his jacket as though nothing had happened.

“Hey! Don’t smoke in this small room!”

(…Here we go again.)

As she shouted in complaint, Ayano began to have doubts about her uncontrollable emotions. As long as Kazuma was near her, she seemed to unconsciously turn aggressive.

Her emotions weren't simply those of hate. After all, Ayano is the type of person who completely ignores those she dislikes. It wouldn't be possible for her to even lift her head to talk to them.

(So this must mean I don't just hate him, I hate him very very very much!)

She used farfetched logic to sooth the unpleasant feeling in her heart. But, just from looking at that detestable person chewing his cigarette and taking out a lighter, Ayano went on a rage once more.

"Are you deaf? I told you not to smoke!"

Kazuma filled his lungs with smoke and released it slowly. The air between them became thick with the smoke. After repeating the same actions once more, he met Ayano's angry stare.

"…I heard you."

The voice reached Ayano's seat along with the smoke. Watching Ayano getting choked by smoke,

Kazuma continued to pollute the air with secondhand smoke.

"…You imbecile!"

Ayano stared at Kazuma's mouth. The spirits quickly responded to the will of the master of fire's descendent.

Bang!

An explosion sounded off. The cigarette that Kazuma was chewing on was burned down instantly. If Kazuma had spat it out even a moment later, his own mouth would have been scorched.

"Heh heh!"

Ignoring Ayano, who seemed proud and pleased with herself, Kazuma took out another cigarette. This time he set up a kekkai around himself, sealing off any flame spirits that may try to get out of control.

Ayano furiously stared once more at Kazuma, who began to produce more smoke. Infuriatingly enough, the smoke went through the kekkai and began to taint her surroundings with its white fumes.

"Stop being stupid, we have to discuss our plans for the mission!"

Ayano fought hard to subdue her desire to burn down the entire train sector and instead proposed a plan for cooperation. It seemed that it was very shocking for her when her father scolded her and called her brainless. All of Ayano's emotional growth could be said to have been developed by Juugo.

Kazuma said calmly,

"If it's the two of us, there is no plan. You just fight Ryuuya, and I'll stay away and cover you. Is there any other way?"

"…Why do I get the feeling my job is much more dangerous?"

Ayano also knew that this was the most efficient way, but she felt that something wasn't right. Since she didn't completely trust Kazuma, she always got the feeling that she was being set up by him.

"This is your family's problem! Shouldn't you work harder for it?"

"For someone who's getting paid for this, you sure sound proud. Mercenaries should fight at the front line! You're obligated to protect me."

"You mean you're that weak?"

Kazuma gave a snort of contempt and said,

"You cannot survive without someone to protect you?"

"You…"

Kazuma then said something even ruder to Ayano, who was so angry that she was at a loss for words.

"Listen well, and remember this. I have no energy to spare to protect you. Ryuuya is very strong. Stronger than me, and of course even stronger than you. We both have to use our powers to their limits, or there's no way we'll win. Even if you don't trust me, at least try to do it for today! Otherwise, we're both screwed."

Kazuma said everything so frankly and calmly that Ayano was unable to rebut. She knew that she was losing her momentum. A strong ki was restraining her to the extent that she could not even move a finger.

"I… I got it already…"

The only resistance she could put up was a tone that sounded as though she was fighting back, because she felt that if she didn't make any attempt to resist, she would have been conquered both physically and mentally and would never be able to resist again.

"But it's just for today… If it weren't for a time like this, I would never…"

She tried her best to rebut, but Kazuma did not reply. His presence earlier seemed to have vanished without a trace, as though it was just a dream. Kazuma relaxed his whole body and lazily fiddled with his cigarette. Ayano thought to herself, he's just like a poisonous bug.

(…What a mean person.)

She scolded in her heart. Why am I so afraid of this self-degrading nicotine addict? What an embarrassment.

"I'm going to sleep."

She left this line and shut her eyes. She suddenly opened them again to stare at Kazuma.

"If you try anything funny, I'll burn you!"

"Don't worry! I'm not interested in creatures that have yet to become a woman."

"…!"

After hearing such a rude reply, Ayano held up her fist and stood. However, Kazuma merely continued to read his magazine without paying any attention to her, clearly acting out what he had just said about not being interested.

In an instant, Ayano came to the verge of tears. She blinked her eyes, which became wet without a proper reason, and returned to her seat and closed her eyes.

Her uncertain feelings became a whirlpool in her heart. She was no longer sure if she was angry or sad anymore.

(Why should I even bother with that guy…?)

Unable to verify her own feelings, Ayano locked her confused thoughts into the depths of her consciousness. She then forced herself to concentrate on sleeping. Within a few seconds, Ayano forgot all about

her unhappiness and gave off peaceful breathing sounds.

After confirming that Ayano was asleep, Kazuma purified the air in the room. The air that he had polluted became clean in a second.

Telling the wind spirits to purify the surrounding air indefinitely, Kazuma focused his mind on the surroundings. He let his senses become synchronized with the wind spirits.

His consciousness fused with the wind. His body, which became an empty shell, smiled lazily in a way that Ayano would have scorned.

(Gee, this girl can really sleep.)

Having thought about the possibility of being attacked while on the move, Kazuma found it hard to relax. Even though his search radius was a massive ten kilometers, when moving at three hundred kilometers per hour, it wasn't very assuring especially considering that that monster could easily attack from more than twenty kilometers away.

Even though this was only to make himself feel more secure, Kazuma continued to keep his guard up. Even if he sensed an attack, he would only be able to

block one hit. The enemy has no reason to focus on Kazuma, because simply destroying the whole cabin would allow him to meet his objective.

(After the first strike, I need to escape quickly before the second hit… And on top of that, I even have to bring along a burden. Is it possible?)

Looking at the "burden" that was sleeping soundly, Kazuma mumbled to himself,

(I guess I have no choice but to just do it…)

No matter how bad the whole situation seemed, the only way out was to take action proactively. Passively waiting for a chance to come by would only result in death.

In the end, however, all of his precautions were too late. The Fuuga clan disappeared without a trace and was yet to be found. They were probably on their way to the sacred grounds. In fact, they might even have arrived already!

He did not intend to let the Fuuga clan's ambitions to be fulfilled. Even though one reason was to save his cute brother, Kazuma had decided long ago that anyone who uses a human as a tribute must die.

…There might be people in the Fuuga clan who were against the revolt, so he needed some way to take care of those people…

Remembering the words of the clan chief, Kazuma showed an evil smile.

(Let me help you save some energy!)

Juugo wouldn't have to decide what to do with the Fuuga clan. After all, Kazuma had already decided on the death penalty for everyone in the clan.

The journey after getting off the train required a car. After exiting the train station, the two headed to the car park as instructed.

Because of the possibility of having to go around the entire mountain, a four wheel Range Rover was prepared. Kazuma placed the key he obtained from Juugo into the ignition and switched on the GPS before starting the engine.

Ayano came in from the door at the other side and sat down. Apparently wary of Kazuma's driving capabilities, she took up the seat belt immediately.

"Don't put on the seat belt."

Kazuma said as he looked at the GPS.

"Why?"

"Ryuuya is much scarier than a car accident. Be prepared to jump out of the vehicle at any time."

"…Understood."

"Then let's go!"

Kazuma swiftly stepped on the pedal to accelerate.

The Range Rover did not meet much interference and went swiftly down the road. After leaving town, they took a scenic route and went around to the back of the mountain.

"Oh yeah, I wanted to ask you something."

"What?"

"You mentioned earlier, Ryuuya's wind is berserk, right? Won't the spirits you control go berserk as well?"

"Well, if they're just attacking, it should be fine. But I doubt they'll stay that way if our fight drags on."

"Are you sure it's going to be okay?"

Ayano asked doubtfully.

"Believe me! Well, in that case, why don't I just test it out- Incoming!"

Kazuma's wind retaliated the black wind that came from above. A furious gale burst from the crash-

ing winds, shaking even the heavyweight Range Rover.

"Jump out!"

As if pushed out by Kazuma's voice, Ayano kicked the door down and jumped out. After jumping out, she realized that Kazuma had ordered her, and she became angry.

"Don't boss me around-"

She glared at the driver seat, but there was no one there anymore.

Somehow, Kazuma had quietly jumped out of the car. Since the car's door was closed, there was no way to imagine how he jumped out as, logically speaking, he should have gotten into action after Ayano.

"Wait…"

Once again speaking over Ayano, Kazuma raised his finger and pointed slightly upwards. Ayano's eyes reflexively followed in that direction.

(Dammit…!)

Kazuma was in control, and she was being toyed around with. She felt like she was unable to move by her own will.

She was so angry she wanted to kill him, but apparently there was no time for that. A shadow came down from the skies where Kazuma was pointing at, and into the center of Ayano's vision.

A corrupt youki, darker and duller than even his black suit. Thin lips, a straight nose, and a proper face that might have once been handsome if it weren't paler than a mask.

"Ryuuya…? I didn't notice at all…"

If it weren't for Kazuma, she would have been killed without even seeing Ryuuya. A chill went down Ayano's spine.

"Don't take him to be same as the Fuuga clan. If a first rate Fuujutsushi hid himself, an Enjutsushi would never be able to find him. Once you get into a melee battle, don't let him get away no matter what."

Kazuma gave a fearless smile to Ayano, who was frozen from the tense situation.

"So… Are you ready?"

"Don't order me around. Just do your job and cover me!"

After throwing that sentence, Ayano dashed out. As she ran, she pulled out Enraiha, and shot a fireball to show her might.

"I told you, that won't work!"

Kazuma grumbled in shock from Ayano's stupidity.

Ryuuya quietly stood before the approaching fireball. The scorching flames crashed into Ryuuya, who did not do anything to defend himself.

Kaboom!!

"That's not enough! Keep pressuring him!!"

Kazuma shouted, watching Ryuuya become surrounded in flames.

"I know! I told you not to boss me around!!"

Ayano waved her Enraiha as she replied. She did not expect such a low level flame to do much harm against that monster. It was good enough to simply divert his attention.

(However… There is nothing that Enraiha cannot destroy!)

But…

Thang!

Her swing with utmost confidence was repelled with a clear sound.

"What…!"

Ryuuya cleared away the flames and closed in at Ayano. She could clearly see the pitch black claws, about thirty centimeters long, coming out of those pair of bending curves.

Did he use those to block Enraiha? Ayano did not even have time to think about it.

She used the red blade to repel the claws that sliced at her from the left and right. Just as she tried to retaliate, the opponent already vanished from sight.

(From behind…!?)

She instinctively swung her blade, somehow catching Ryuuya. The pitch black claws blocked Enraiha, with screeching sounds marking the impact.

Their weapons clashed, but in terms of size and power, Ayano was at a disadvantage. She forcefully pushed forward her blade, jumping back and using the force from Ryuuya's push to create some distance between them.

"What the hell have you been covering, Kazuma!?"

Ayano did not look away from Ryuuya, but furiously scolded her partner who was doing nothing. However, she did not get a reply, no matter how long she waited.

"…Hey, Kazuma?"

With a very unpleasant premonition, she hesitantly called out to Kazuma again. This time, she finally got a reply… in the form of a distant voice transmitted by Fuujutsu.

"I'll be going first! You handle Ryuuya. Good luck!"

Hearing the playful words from the wind made Ayano stand dumbfounded for ten seconds.

"…"

Ayano stood with her head bowed down. Suddenly, golden flames burst out of her body. Maybe she was holding the hilt tightly, because the tip of Enraiha shivered slightly.

Ayano raised her head, and glared sharply past Ryuuya as if she could see the despicable person who had slipped away long ago.

Ayano shouted in a trembling and furious voice.

"You… You damn traitor!! Watch it! After I beat this guy, you're next…!!"

Her shout echoed throughout the empty mountains.

Part 2

At the same time, Kazuma was gliding thirty meters above the ground.

"That girl sure is energetic. Anyway, just don't die, and try to buy me some time!"

As he muttered something that would infuriate Ayano if she had heard it, Kazuma began his search for the seal.

"Is that it…?"

There was no need to even search, as he found the target, the Samadhi Flame, instantly. With Kazuma's spiritual eyes, finding such a bright, shining flame was as simple as looking for the sun.

Kazuma temporarily descended to the ground and called the wind for one final jump. This time, he jumped much higher than previously before and easily went above a hundred meters. It would be better described as flying!

He lost almost no altitude as he sailed to the area above the seal, observing the situation below him.

"Hmph… Found my brother."

From a bird's eye view, the events going on at the sealing grounds could not be any more obvious. Perhaps in an attempt at concealment, the sealing altar was smaller than expected.

Hyoue and Ren were at one corner, with about twenty people surrounding them. Contrary to Juugo's prediction, it seemed that the entire Fuuga clan participated in the revolt.

Kazuma stopped the wind, and, as if walking down stairs, descended from a hundred meters above the ground with ease. Once he was about ten meters from the surface, Hyoue raised his head…

"Too slow!!"

Kazuma placed a gush of wind between Ren and Hyoue. As he blew Hyoue away, he reached out for Ren.

"Ren…!!"

He seemed to be conscious. Ren reached out as far as he could, grabbing Kazuma's hand.

Kazuma pulled the tiny body to his chest and hugged him tightly. With that, they glided horizontally somwhat before landing softly.

"Ren, are you okay?"

It was hard to believe that the gentle voice asking this question belonged to the beast who cruelly left Ayano.

"Ye… Yes…"

"Very good… Good boy."

Kazuma let Ren down and looked peacefully at Hyoue.

Hyoue, who had finally managed to get up, stared back at Kazuma with hatred.

"You… How did you… So that's what happened. You used Ayano as bait to infiltrate this place by yourself? What a despicable man you are, sacrificing a girl."

"You have no right to say that about me, you damn old man who offered your son to the devil. What can you say about yourself? Ryuuya's consciousness should be gone without a trace by now!"

"So what of it?"

Hyoue replied without a care, acting fearless. Obviously, he had never regretted it.

"Why don't you think about this instead: If the flames of Kannagi are the Purifying Flames, then the winds of Fuuga are the Winds of Corruption! Our jus-

tice is to corrupt the world and fulfill our own desires! And for that justice, sacrificing one or two sons is nothing!"

Ayano would have thought that Hyoue was insane. However, Kazuma understood his thinking very well.

When failure was not allowed, only the strong can fight righteously. If someone with insufficient power hoped to win, he could only seek to give up the morals of a human.

Wanting to seek his personal desires, even if it meant being looked down upon or being blamed by the whole world… It was all too familiar to Kazuma. Even so, he did not intend to let Hyoue off.

"But everything is over now. Haven't you played enough?"

"Not yet! It is not over yet!"

Hyoue laughed fearlessly. His bloodshot eyes still did not show any sign of despair.

"If you think you have won, you are so wrong."

"Is that so? Feel free to give it your all!"

Kazuma spoke in a way that would enrages any opponent. Ren, who was hiding behind him, laughed

as well. However, the normal Ren would never give off such an evil smile.

Ren pulled out a hidden dagger and slowly stabbed it into Kazuma's waist.

Kazuma's body shook lightly, and his eyes widened.

"Ho…hohahahahaha! Fool! You shall die in the hands of your own brother!"

Hyoue laughed loudly, but his eyes began to narrow with doubt soon after.

Ren had stopped moving along with Kazuma. Or rather, Ren was trying to pull the dagger out, but it would not budge.

"What are you doing, 'Ren'! Kill him quickly!"

"I think that would be very difficult!"

Kazuma suddenly stretched his left hand forward, and in it was the dagger that was supposed to be in Ren's hand.

"You… How did you…"

"Ren" gave a moan. Kazuma threw the dagger away and turned to face him.

"Did you think I wouldn't notice such malevolent youki in his body?"

Kazuma widened his hands to grab "Ren"'s face.

"Ren" struggled painfully. Kazuma easily overpowered him and began to gather ki.

"I don't know what you put inside, but this is Ren's body."

After saying that, Kazuma released his ki.

"Go back to hell!"

His strong ki instantly vanquished the youma that was in Ren, giving no chance for it to escape. Holding Ren's weak body, Kazuma waited for him to wake up.

"Argh… Ah… Nii-sama…?"

"Oh, you got up."

Kazuma's voice was as calm as if all the tragic events that had happened at the hotel were just a dream.

"Nii… Nii… Nii-sama!"

Ren remembered everything. Just as he was about to run up to hug his brother, Kazuma raised his hand to block him off.

"Nii… Nii-sama?"

Ren had an unpleasant premonition from his brother's smile, and hurriedly tried to retreat… But it

was too late. Kazuma's hands grabbed Ren's cheeks and pressed hard into them.

"It… It hurts…"

Kazuma ignored Ren's cries and, continuing to smile, stretched his cheeks to the sides.

"Why did you get caught so easily? You're a guy! Do you think you have the right to play the damsel in distress? Why do I have to come all the way to Kyoto to rescue you, you rascal?"

"Aii… Aii errm soo saoii, iisama (I… I am so sorry, Nii-sama)!"

Ren waved his hands and legs nervously, shedding tears and begging for his brother's forgiveness. Maybe after seeing this scene, he could no longer be angry, so Kazuma loosened his fingers.

"That… That was so mean, Nii-sama…"

"You idiot, if you were someone else, I would have beaten the hell out of you."

Pressing on his painful red cheeks, Ren raised his head up with watery eyes. His cute gesture could almost instantly knock out big sisters with strange interests. However, it didn't work on Kazuma. He pushed Ren away coldly and faced Hyoue once more.

"We've fooled around enough, I guess. Shall I make my move now?"

"Hmmm…"

Hyoue groaned. Kazuma's presence was completely out of his calculations. Not only did he possess great power, his techniques were also unbelievable.

Hyoue had never seen anything like the exorcism that Kazuma had just performed. He had made it look easy, but in reality, it might have been a very sophisticated and delicate technique. It was extraordinary for him to have been able to activate it in an instant.

"It seems like deciding to use you was the biggest mistake I made."

"Yes, I think so too. If it weren't for all these petty tricks, maybe the Kannagi clan would have perished by now!"

The reason why Kazuma agreed so readily was because he knew that this would deal another blow to Hyoue. Kazuma never held back on anything that could distress other people.

"But why!? Why do you try to stop me!? You should know very well the hatred of someone who was bullied! The humiliation of being forced to kneel before

others! You should have experienced them, felt them too!

You hate the Kannagi too, right? You despise them, right? Aren't we all the same? You should be on our side!!"

Ren lifted his head to look at his brother. As Hyoue had said, Kazuma had been through situations very similar to the Fuuga clan. Even though he had said that he no longer hated the Kannagi clan, wouldn't Hyoue's words remind him of his hatred once more?

"Yeah, that's right. My feelings are like yours. I wouldn't care less even if the Kannagi clan died out."

"Nii-sama…!?"

Ren's expression changed immediately as he grabbed Kazuma's hand.

After seeing this scene, Hyoue smirked. If he could get Kazuma on his side, the battle situation would be turned around instantly. Even if Kazuma did not join him, as long as he no longer interfered…

"In that case, we have no reason to fight anymore, do we? I am not asking you to help, but to just stop interfering with us, as destroying the Kannagi clan is our wish.

These three hundred years, we were controlled by the Kannagi clan as slaves. Three hundred years! Our ancestors did commit a sin in the past. But just how long must we pay to redeem ourselves!? When will we ever be forgiven!?"

Kazuma silently watched Hyoue, who burst out with such passion and emotion. He took out a cigarette from a hidden pocket and lit it with a lighter.

"Besides, why must we pay for sins our ancestors committed? Why must we be used and humiliated like slaves? What crimes did we commit? No, no, no! I cannot accept this! I will never acknowledge the Kannagi's arrogance! This is a justified revenge! I have every right to destroy the Kannagi clan!"

"…Are you done yet?"

Stepping on the cigarette ashes with his foot, Kazuma asked,

"So you have nothing else left to say?"

After understanding the true meaning of that sentence, Hyoue widened his eyes in shock.

"You… Still want to go against me… Why? Why do you try so hard to please the Kannagi clan? You have such magnificent powers, and yet, why!?"

"Because the clan chief offered 100 million yen to hire me."

Kazuma said frankly. Hyoue became dumbfounded, unable to say anything.

"Nii-sama…?"

Ren raised his tone and asked suspiciously,

"So that means Nii-sama came here to work? Not to save me?"

"My belief is to take whatever you can. It's just killing two birds with one stone!"

Ren's doubts were not erased even after hearing Kazuma's explanation. Kazuma faced his brother, who was looking at him with accusing eyes, and smiled bitterly.

"It's not easy to stay alive. One day, you'll come to understand that too… Hey. Where do you think you're going, old man?"

Kazuma spotted Hyoue, who tried to escape while the two were chatting. He halted at Kazuma's words.

"So are you finished praying? What a coincidence that your God seems to be in the area too."

Hehehehehe. Kazuma purposely sneered to mock his opponent.

"…Don't think you have won just yet!"

Hyoue's face grew red with anger. He gave a signal, and about ten people of both genders came out. Kazuma lazily looked at the daggers and clubs that they were holding.

"No matter how many Fuuga people come out… Hey wait… Old man, what did you do to these people?"

These practitioners, who had unfocused pupils and staggering steps, were obviously not conscious.

"These people forgot the pride of the Fuuga clan! They are dumb fools who willingly wanted to be slaves of the Kannagi. They should think about who they are, to try to persuade and stop me. So I took away their consciousness, and they are now puppets. Hahahahaha…"

Hyoue's laughter was earsplitting. The look of that stubborn old man was beyond ugly.

"So how about it, Kazuma? These people are loyal to the Kannagi! They are practitioners who are righteous and respectable! You, who is a follower of the Kannagi, should not be able to kill them! So tell me, what are you going to do…?"

"This."

Kazuma stopped Hyoue's speech and cut off their heads, all at the same time. As if it was just a joke, the ten heads flew up into the sky at the same time and landed on the ground one by one.

"You… You bastard! Against innocent people who were merely being controlled… Are you even human?"

"You stop talking about me. I'm not some hero of justice. I don't care if they're being controlled or blackmailed: Anyone who points a knife at me is my enemy. A little girl would be no exception."

Hyoue was at a loss of words after hearing his cold-blooded declaration. At that moment…

"Da… Damn you!"

A man broke from the lined up Fuuga clan, which was now half as large as it was before. Kazuma had killed his wife just now. Since his wife was unable to accept Hyoue's ambitions, her consciousness had been taken away. However, if the Kannagi was destroyed, she would have been turned back to normal, and they could have lived in a happier place than before.

"Woahhhhhhh!!"

The man threw wind blades at Kazuma. However, compared to Kazuma's wind, they were tiny and pitiful.

Kazuma seized control of those tiny wind blades and chopped off the caster's head with them. The man's head fell on the floor and rolled to a stop by his wife's head.

No one dared to move. The image of a person wrapped in northern winds and bringing down heartless punishment was just like a shinigami descending upon the real world…

"Ah ah… By the way, how many people are left?"

"Wa… Wahhhhhhhh!"

Those lazy words were just like a signal. The Fuuga clan lost control of themselves and scattered away.

"Stay… Stay there!"

No one listened to Hyoue's orders. Even if it was just one step further, everyone fled from Kazuma as if their lives depended on it. A fear that surpassed the teachings of the Fuuga clan had taken control their hearts.

By now, the Fuuga clan was no more. But to Kazuma, the real problem began only now.

"Nii… Nii-sama, you really overdid it! There was no need to kill those people who were controlled, was there!?"

Kazuma had to comfort Ren, who was tearfully interrogating Kazuma.

"Oh? Is… Is that so?"

To Kazuma, he was already acting with Ren's feelings in mind by trying to prevent unnecessary deaths…

"Let's… Let's put this aside for now, and take care of that old man first!"

Kazuma used Hyoue as a shield to change the topic.

"Sorry to make you wait. Are you ready?"

"Damn… Kid…"

Hyoue angrily spewed out infinite curses at Kazuma, who was never shy with his words. He was now alone after having been abandoned by his subordinates.

Of course, he himself had tried to escape several times. But each time, Kazuma had stopped him.

Even when Kazuma turned around or was busy trying to comfort Ren, his eyes never left Hyoue.

"However, it is not over yet. Nothing has ended yet… Bastard! Did you think that without Ryuuya, I am just a useless old man?"

Kazuma stayed quiet. This sentence was not fit enough for him to even reply to.

"If that is what you think, then you are very wrong! Ryuuya was not the only one who obtained power from the contract!"

"Ryuuya obtained nothing."

Kazuma corrected him coldly.

"That guy lost everything."

"Hmph, that is but a small problem."

Hyoue then said at the top of his voice,

"Watch closely! This is the Power that I have obtained!"

As he made his declaration, an abnormal youki began spreading everywhere. Space was sliced open, and, from an unknown, hidden world, it… No, they… appeared.

"Wahhhhhh!?"

Ren screamed loudly, and for good reason. The two of them were now surrounded by all kinds of youma, packed so tightly together that even water

might not have been able to get through. They were probably over a hundred strong.

Hyoue laughed out loud from behind the horde of youma.

"So, how is that? Shocked? This is my power!"

"…and how is this 'your' power?"

Kazuma countered lazily. The power that Hyoue was so proud of was nothing more than low level youma borrowed from the one that possessed Ryuuya. Borrowing something that was borrowed. As his power was something that had been borrowed twice, Hyoue himself possessed no power.

"Small issue."

But Hyoue did not seem to care.

"I will meet up with Ryuuya, so why don't you stay and play with these guys!"

With that, Hyoue mingled into the large group of youma and disappeared.

The remaining two people were surrounded by the youma. It seemed like there was no way out of this. Ren became tense from fear.

"Nii… Nii-sama… I shall take care of the ones in the back…"

"Don't move, I'll take care of them all at once."

As Kazuma had said, it was something that happened in the blink of an eye. A rapid wind from the skies became a metal hammer and came straight down, smashing into the surface. All of the youma were ripped and crushed by the tremendous force.

(How… How powerful…)

Ren held his breath as he watched it happen. What a scary power. If it was power like that, it was not hard to understand how it had defeated Genma.

"What are you waiting for? Quickly, run after that old man!"

Kazuma grabbed Ren, who was still standing shocked, to fly off, but,

"…Ahhh?"

At this, Ren turned back and asked,

"What's wrong?"

Kazuma hesitated slightly before asking back,

"…Ayano came here too. Can you feel her?"

"Huh…? No, nothing."

Ren continued to try to detect a presence… But he could feel nothing.

"But, Enjutsushi are not good at detecting presence in the first place…"

"Not to the extent that you are unable to detect an Enraiha in battle… Looks like she lost."

"How can that be?! Impossible!"

Ren declared instantly. He was absolutely certain.

This was a sign of absolute trust. It was impossible for the wielder of Enraiha to lose, just like it was impossible of heaven and earth turning around.

"If Nee-sama's ki became quiet, then that means Nee-sama has already won. There can be no other possibility!"

"Let's hope so. That would save a lot of effort."

Kazuma played along with the confident Ren, and once again picked him up as if he was an item.

"Let's meet up with Ayano first! It'll be troublesome if she dies."

"Is it okay to not chase after Hyoue?"

"We have plenty of chances to kill that old man… Let's go!"

Kazuma leaped up with that shout.

Part 3

The wind was very gentle, yet at the same time forcefully took them up to the skies. They overcame gravity easily, flying past tree branches to an even higher place…

"Wow… This is great… What a magnificent view!"

Perhaps since it was his second time flying at a high altitude, Ren began to enjoy the spectacular view from above. Even though Kazuma wanted to let him watch longer, he continued to increase their speed.

"Huh? Is it over already?"

Ren said sadly as he realized they were beginning to descend.

"When this is over, you can watch for as long as you want. Just bear with it for now!"

The two of them landed on a small, empty area.

"She's here… See? I was right after all."

"Nee… Nee-sama!?"

Ren doubted his eyes. Ayano was stained with blood all over and was coming towards them. She was dragging herself with staggering steps and seemed about to fall down at any time.

Enraiha was just barely dangling from her weakened, drooping right arm. The tip of the blade scraped the surface of the earth as she moved and produced an exceptionally earsplitting sound.

Ayano stopped before the two of them. Completely covered with wounds, she glared furiously at Kazuma with eyes that seemed as if they would shoot out fire.

"You lost completely!"

Kazuma did not seem to care about Ayano's murderous intent. His cold words did not carry any guilt of leaving behind Ayano as bait.

"You asshole…"

Ayano squeezed out the last of her remaining strength and pointed her Enraiha at the despicable traitor before her. A beautiful, shining flame surrounded the crimson blade.

However, she no longer had any strength to swing the blade. Ayano dropped Enraiha, which stopped shining and rolled onto the floor, and collapsed into Kazuma's arms from lack of strength.

The divine sword that fell to the ground began to disappear as if merging with the air.

"Idiot. Trying to swing a divine sword with a half-dead body? Of course she'd overexert herself and run out of strength."

Kazuma's heartless words never reached Ayano's ears. She was completely unconscious. Her face was pale beyond pale - It was as white as a corpse.

"Nee-sama! Ayano nee-sama!"

"You're so noisy, shut up."

Without even turning his head, Kazuma ordered his screaming brother to be quiet and grabbed Ayano's hair to lift up her face. He was apparently checking her body condition, but the way he went about it was so rough that he did not seem to be worried about Ayano.

After a long moment, Ren asked, flustered,

"Nii-sama, Ayano nee-sama is going to be fine… right…?"

"Nope, she's dead meat."

Kazuma mercilessly crushed Ren's expectations.

"How… How can that…"

"The wounds themselves aren't much. The problem is the youki that entered her body through them. She's

just one step away from having her body be completely overrun by youki."

He gave a diagnosis as if he was a doctor, but real doctors would most definitely had complained about his cold-blooded and straightforward words!

"But, what kind of youki could freeze a divine child of the flames, and Enraiha together with her? Just where did that old man Hyoue find such a youma?"

"Now is not the time to discuss that problem, right? If you don't save Ayano nee-sama soon…"

"Ren, catch."

Kazuma suddenly tossed Ayano's body at Ren.

"Wah!"

Even though Ayano was slim and completely drained of strength, she was still far too heavy for a twelve year old youth to carry. The two of them fell onto the floor together.

"Wha… What…"

Ren, who meant to make a fuss, suddenly realized how cold Ayano's body was. Even though she was still breathing, she was no different from a corpse. When Kazuma had said "freeze", it was not a metaphor - It was the truth, literally.

Ren, as an Enjutsushi, could clearly sense Ayano's flame of life burning out with every second.

"Is… Is there no way to save Nee-sama, Nii-sama!?"

"Hmm… It's not that it's impossible, but…"

"But what!?"

"It would be a waste."

An indescribable silence filled the scene. Like a puppet, Ren stared at Kazuma with a frozen expression.

Kazuma watched Ren silently as well.

"…What did you say?"

Ren broke the silence with an exceptionally dull voice.

"It would be a waste."

Kazuma repeated it calmly once more. He spoke naturally as if stating an obvious fact.

"It's a really valuable medicine, and I probably won't get another one like it."

He shrugged his shoulders, as though saying that it can't be helped.

Ren could not believe that there existed someone who would say that a medicine was more important

than a human life, and that the someone was his own brother. He expressed his shock in words.

"That is not the problem, is it? If this continues, Nee-sama will die, and saying that using medicine is too wasteful… That cannot be true, right?"

"It's not a big deal even if Ayano dies! It's not like the main bloodline will die off completely. You can just inherit the Enraiha. Then our old man would also be very happy."

This was the first time Ren had ever heard such inhumane words. The blood in his body grew hot as if boiling, and the flame spirits gave off a cheerful sound in anticipation of a battle.

"What's wrong?"

Kazuma looked at his brother, who bowed down in silence, with caring eyes.

"Don't…"

"'Don't'…?"

"Don't joke around with me…!!"

Ren's roar struck Kazuma as a physical shock. Kazuma used his ki to perform the lowest level of defense, smirking while letting Ren hit him.

Only Kazuma could understand that this phenomenon was the result of the spirits responding to Ren's rage.

(Yes, that's the way to go.)

The characteristic of fire is "aggressive flames". A strong rage is the key factor of synchronizing with flame spirits. They will never lend their full powers to a human who is usually calm and timid.

Only when one possesses great rage, and is able to control that rage, can one be a first rate Enjutsushi.

Filling the area with stifling heat that felt like a metal smelting furnace, the flame spirits responded to Ren's rage and continued to gather.

"Give me the medicine."

Ren ordered softly. He had no need to roar now, as he knew very well what he needed to do. If the opponent decided to resist, he would have to get the medicine even if he died in the process. Whether he succeeded or not was inconsequential - This was something he had to do.

"Okay… I got it, don't threaten me anymore."

Kazuma raised his hands to surrender. He was unable to keep his smile. With a calm fighting spirit and

the mental energy to control it, Ren had already began his journey to become a first class Jutsushi.

Kazuma walked past Ren and stopped by Ayano, who was now lying motionless on the floor. Looking down at her, he toyed with a bottle he took out from his hidden pocket.

To say that he did it without hesitation would most definitely be a lie. After all, it was an extremely rare and valuable medicine. But even so, as long as it was for Ren's growth, he did not mind paying such a price, especially since it did not cost him a single cent in the first place.

He kneeled by Ayano's side and considered tipping the contents of the bottle into Ayano's pale lips, but gave up in the end. She did not seem to have the strength to even drink it, and spilling the medicine would really be a waste.

Kazuma stretched his hand under Ayano and lifted her upper body. He drank the medicine himself, then closed his lips onto Ayano's as if throwing his entire body onto her.

"Wah!"

From the corner of his eyes, Kazuma could see Ren, who was at his side, flushing red yet staring, mesmerized, as Kazuma poured the medicine into Ayano's lips by mouth-to-mouth.

(Hmmm…)

Ayano first felt warmth. Something seemed to be quickly removing the youki that was invading her body. Heat, or rather, life, came back bit by bit.

She slowly began to detect the situation around her. She knew she was being surrounded by a powerful force, and that a warm, healing spiritual energy was coming in from her lips.

Ayano felt as if someone had just pulled her back from the gates of death gently, yet powerfully.

She opened her eyes slowly, and, at the close distance that her eyes instantly focused on, the one before her was…

"…!!!"

Ayano's consciousness became awake in an instant and she used all of her strength to push Kazuma away.

Kazuma moved away lazily, as if he saw through Ayano's cute reactions out of nervousness, and steadily stood up.

(I… I was kissed…? Why…?)

Ayano pressed her lips with her left hand. Her right hand was tightly hugging her own body. Like a

weak girl who had just been assaulted by a rapist, she closed her legs tightly and contracted her body.

(What's going on…?)

It was impossible to understand the situation, as she did not know what was going on.

Maybe due to the youki that had invaded her, her memories did not seem to add up. Not just how she wanted to cut Kazuma with her sword - She could not even remember how they met up in the first place.

She lifted her head to look at Kazuma suspiciously, who stared back calmly as though he was observing some animal in an experiment. Actually, he was observing how effective the medicine was, but it was impossible for Ayano to know that.

Anger began to grow within her. After taking away a girl's kiss, and her first kiss at that, the other party did not even seem to have a shred of guilt. She could not accept this at all.

"What the hell were you doing…!!!"

"Is that how you talk to your benefactor?"

"Huh…?"

The cold reply weakened Ayano's attitude. Ren ran over with wet eyes and raised his head to look at Ayano, fighting back tears.

"Nee… Nee-sama…"

It was hard to imagine that the now revived Ayano, who was brimming with energy, was about to die just now. Even her wounds and blood had disappeared.

"Nee-sama! Nee-sama! Nee-sama!"

Ren was happily hugging his beloved "sister" tightly as he began to cry. As if trying to confirm that this was not a dream, he continued to hug Ayano with all his might and continued to call her name.

Even though he was just a kid, a twelve year old still has some arm power. Though Ayano was uncomfortable, she still insisted on rubbing Ren's head gently.

"Ren, calm down… Everything's fine. I will protect you, so don't be afraid…"

"Idiot."

Kazuma mercilessly shot down Ayano. Ignoring her murderous intent, he continued,

"Ren was worried about you. You were totally thrashed by Ryuuya earlier and almost died. By the way, the one who saved you is me, so be grateful."

This speech, made by someone who claimed to be her benefactor, made Ayano's temple entangle together. Ren stopped his tears and immediately froze once he felt the strong atmosphere that could silence a crying child.

Ayano suddenly lowered her head and looked at Ren. She grabbed him, who was subconsciously trying to run away, and pressed his shoulder, asking with a scary face,

"Is that true?"

"Huh… Huh…"

Ren looked troubled, unsure of what she meant by the question. Ayano moved closer and repeated once more,

"That guy said he saved me. Is that true?"

Shivering, Ren answered in a soft and delicate voice,

"It… It is true. Nii-sama, he took the medicine… then… mouth-to-mouth…"

"Forget this."

Ayano stopped Ren's reply softly. The hand that was pressing his shoulder became more forceful, as if she was looking at Ren from above. Seeing her fake smile, Ren was so scared that his legs went limp.

"You saw nothing, understand?"

Ren silently nodded.

"Oh yeah, what did you make me drink? It's not something with weird side effects, right?"

Ayano asked suspiciously. She knew that she almost died just now, so she could not trust something that was able to completely cure her in just a few minutes.

"Elixir."

Kazuma replied simply.

"Elixir? You don't mean that, what's it called, 'Water of Life'!?"

"Ehhhhhhhhhh…!?"

Ayano, and in fact even Ren, who was on the verge of tears, gave off sounds of surprise. This was normal, since the so-called "Water of Life" is a miracle drug with amazing effects, made with the essence of alchemy. It is said to even be able to revive the dead. It is

uncertain if such a miracle drug, or even its formula, exists at all.

"That kind of thing… Where did you get it…"

"Before that, don't you have anything to say?"

Kazuma seemed very calm since the beginning, in contrast to Ayano, who was shocked. Realizing what Kazuma meant, Ayano reluctantly thanked him,

"…Thank you."

"Don't mention it. I'll just charge extra. Maybe another hundred million will do."

"You… You bastard! Can't you ignore some losses to help someone!? Isn't it too low for a human to measure everything in terms of money!?"

"You think this is something that can be bought with money!?"

"Argh…"

Kazuma raised his voice imposingly, making Ayano speechless. This was the first time Kazuma became so emotional. Apparently, his precious medicine being used made him feel very unhappy.

Indeed, something like elixir cannot be bought with money. It is something that can even revive the dead. It's not hard to believe that many people would

want it even if it made them bankrupt, and selling it for just a hundred million was simply outrageous.

Even so, Kazuma managed to change his mood with just one sigh.

"Never mind. Let's forget what happened in the past! Oh yeah, Ayano. So, why did you lose?"

"…Why are you asking such a thing?"

Ayano replied bitterly to the question that shattered her pride.

"Of course I have to ask. I always thought of your Enraiha as the ultimate weapon. If it's useless, then I have to rethink the whole battle plan. Therefore, tell me, what's going on? Don't tell me Enraiha can't burn Ryuuya even if it cuts into him?"

"Huh… Errr… That is…"

Kazuma's gaze at Ayano became colder and colder, sapping her ability to speak. She was too scared to make eye contact, so she shifted her eyes about randomly.

"You mean, you didn't even hit him once? All of your attacks were predicted?"

"Hmm…"

"And you panicked, releasing Enjutsu that was completely repelled by his wind."

"Errm… errr…"

"After taking his onslaught of one-sided attacks, your injuries continued to increase."

"…"

"In the end, you somehow managed to escape. Since this is too embarrassing for you to bear, should I praise you on your ability to run away?"

"Wha… What!? How can you say such a thing!?"

Ayano finally lost her temper from listening to Kazuma's cruel and heartless comments.

"After telling me to trust you so proudly before, in the end you just ran off and left me behind with a few words! For someone who leaves the biggest problems to other people, what right do you have to say such a thing!?"

"Oh, sorry."

"…Huh?"

Ayano widened her eyes at this unexpected reply. She had expected him to retaliate by mocking her vigorously, so it was unimaginable that he would apologize so honestly.

As if he could not let it go, Kazuma continued,

"I never expected you to be that weak."

Ba-doom!!

An explosive noise came from her heart. Crackling sounds began to surround Ayano. Ren quickly retreated away from Ayano as if bouncing off.

"I thought that before I rescued Ren, you could at least buy some more time. Too bad, I guess I was too hard on you after all. Sorry."

Ayano gripped Enraiha's hilt with all of her strength. Her fighting spirit spread throughout her body, and the fallen leaves by her feet started dancing in the air. In the night of autumn, the temperature quickly rose until it became hotter than a sunlit day. Ren tensely watched as he was roasted by the hot air.

"When you tried to cut me before… Back then, I had thought that you were taking it easy on me, since I'm part of your family. I totally didn't realize that you were serious, sorr…"

Ayano moved her hand to shut Kazuma up. With all of her concentration, she mercilessly and unhesitatingly swung the Enraiha.

"Oh oh!"

Kazuma easily shifted his body and avoided her initial swing. Following his movements, Ayano slashed diagonally upwards, but Kazuma escaped to the left.

(Don't even think about escaping!)

Ayano twisted her hand and pulled Enraiha back. With the blade pointed at Kazuma, she stepped out forcefully, ready to lunge forward with a stab…

"Nee-sama!"

Since Ren rushed over and hugged Ayano's waist tightly, Enraiha missed its target.

"What are you doing, Ren? Get away now!!"

"No! Now is not the time to be doing this, is it!?"

Ayano was speechless at being reprimanded by a boy four years younger.

"Nii-sama too! Why did you do something so detestable!?"

Ren directed the blame to Kazuma as well. The youth had finally gotten his responsibility up by now, realizing that nothing good would come out of leaving the two of them to do as they wish.

"I didn't annoy her."

"Then why did you say all of that?"

Ren continued to ask Kazuma, who was replying randomly. A distrustful aura surrounded him.

"Just relieving some stress. That's all."

"……"

"The one who was supposed to be our final weapon turned out to be a little kitten. Anyone would want to complain, right?"

"Nee… Nee-sama… Calm down…"

Ren tried his best to comfort Ayano, who seemed ready to explode.

"…I know. I won't get angry anymore, so you can let go now."

Ayano, weakened by Ren's face that was on the verge of tears, said that with some measure of calmness. She exhaled as if letting out all the air in her lungs, relaxing her rage in the process.

"By the way, did you take care of Hyoue?"

"Nope, he escaped."

"…What?"

Ayano suddenly shouted back. No matter what she said, she had deep faith in Kazuma's powers. If Kazuma was actually unable to finish off someone like Hyoue…

"…What happened?"

"That old man summoned over a hundred youma at once. I was busy taking care of that when he took the chance to run off."

"Over a hundred?"

Seeing the doubtful Ayano, Ren confirmed Kazuma's words.

"It is true, Nee-sama. Youma that blocked all vision! Nii-sama used one move to get rid of all of them! The reason why we failed to catch Hyoue was…"

(To save Nee-sama…)

Kazuma stopped Ren from completing that sentence. Kazuma pressed his fingertip onto Ren's lips, awkwardly silencing him.

"What are you trying to hide?"

"Nothing important. Anyway, the biggest problem now is Ryuuya. If this happens again, we'll die for sure."

"…You still intend to fight?"

Hearing this, Kazuma proceeded to judge the cowering Ayano.

(I never expected her to be so weak mentally.)

But now was definitely not the time to let her continue being depressed. He planned to fight against that monster alone, but the suffering and efforts had to be shared by everyone. That is Kazuma's belief.

"What, are you scared? Well, I won't blame you, since you lost so miserably just now. The next time you're caught, I promise not to laugh."

After being completely humiliated in such a way, Ayano's cheeks became so red she put on blushers.

"Even if I can't win, at least I can commit seppuku before the enemy catches me! I won't leave even a cell to those guys! I have that kind of determination, so don't look down on me!"

She rebutted angrily. Her spirit was plenty, but the content was unacceptable.

Unsure of how to respond, Kazuma's eyebrows creased together as Ayano continued,

"What I meant was that we should head back and reorganize our fighting force. Since Ren is already rescued, there shouldn't be any risk of the seal breaking, so…"

"Rejected."

Kazuma bluntly refused Ayano's suggestion.

"It won't work out if we're attacked while moving. If the entire transport vehicle is destroyed, are you sure you can escape?"

"But they won't be stupid enough to kill Ren, would they? If they do that, they can't break the seal."

"Hyoue's goal is to destroy the Kannagi clan. From the looks of it, he hates the Kannagi clan to the core. Releasing the seal placed upon their god was probably just one of the ways he planned to do it."

Even though he used the word "probably", Kazuma was actually very certain. If Ayano saw that insane hatred with her own eyes, perhaps she would be able to understand!

To Hyoue, God or Devil is nothing but power. In his heart, he only thinks about how he can use them. Since he had Ryuuya, who could be used to destroy the Kannagi clan, he did not need to obsessed over breaking the seal of their god.

"Besides, they'd win if they kill us. My old man is now heavy with injuries…"

"That was your fault!"

"Don't talk about that right now. No matter how powerful the clan chief may be, his body can't fight.

The branch family is completely useless. In other words, if we die, it means the end of the Kannagi clan. Got it?"

After hearing his logical analysis, Ayano had no way of rebutting. Even though she knew that Kazuma was right, her body naturally rejected the fact that she would have to fight against Ryuuya once more.

But before she could recollect herself, Kazuma raised his head to look into the sky.

"No time to think… We've been found."

"…? Didn't you set up a kekkai?"

"Yeah, but after what the two of you did, I doubt it'll last."

"…I'm so sorry."

"It's okay… By the way, Ren."

"Ah, yes?"

Ren, who was called suddenly, replied in a rising voice.

Kazuma then made a cruel declaration,

"Hyoue will definitely target you, because he'd still want the power of a God. But we'll be struggling with just Ryuuya, so there's no way we can protect you. Therefore, handle your own problems by yourself."

This sentence seemed to imply "you might as well die if you're a nuisance", so Ren became tense upon hearing it. But he recovered in a while, and looked back at his brother with determined eyes.

"I… I got it. I can handle someone like Hyoue by myself. If I lose, I shall commit seppuku before I get caught, so I won't cause any trouble for Nii-sama. Will that do?"

Ren said, with a pale face.

Kazuma, unsure whether to laugh or cry, stared at Ren, and then turned his head to Ayano.

"Man, because you said such stupid things, now Ren has no clue what he's fighting so hard for."

"What stupid things? As the main family of the Kannagi clan, this kind of determination is only natural!"

Kazuma, rather than concerning himself with Ayano, turned to Ren instead. He grabbed the tiny head that stood before his chest.

"Wha… What's the matter, Nii-sama?"

"Ren, let me tell you the rules of this game. 'The survivor always wins'. Simple enough?"

Ren was at a loss due to the sudden roughness, but Kazuma continued without caring.

"Someone without the will to live will lose for sure. This is a rule that will never change, so remember that.

Listen well. You're just a kid - No one thinks you're of much use, so just doing what you can will be enough."

"Doing what I can…?"

"That'd be 'to live'. Don't try to beautify death with terms like 'self-sacrifice'. Death is the end of everything. You'll lose your past, present and future in an instant. There is no way to start over. It is the absolute end."

Unable to lose nor sacrifice, Kazuma could not accept exchanging the future of a twelve year old for peace.

He did not want to lose anything important anymore.

"But as long as you're still alive, there will be a chance to turn the tables around. So, even if your teeth are knocked out, you have to swallow them back along with your blood. No matter how pathetic or shameful it seems, never give up on surviving. Even if you must

struggle to the very last moment, that is your battle. Can you do it?"

Kazuma looked at Ren closely, and Ren returned his gaze in the same way.

Never give up, never throw hope away - That is what is required to win. That is what Ren learned from Kazuma. His pale face regained its natural color, and the dread of being pushed to a dead-end faded from his eyes.

(I am not alone.

There are people who protect me, people who support me, so all I need to do is finish whatever I can. Because this is the best way to make the current me, who is still immature, useful.)

"Yes!"

Hearing such an energetic reply, Kazuma gave off a gentle smile. Ren was comfortable with having his head rubbed so roughly.

"So then…"

Kazuma pushed Ren backwards lightly and told Ayano, without shifting his eyes,

"…He's here."

Ayano raised her head to look into the sky. As if slicing open the blue sky, a black shadow darker than darkness itself emerged from a point in the sky. Following that, the shadow expanded quickly, clearly revealing its face.

"So he's here…"

Ayano mumbled in a trembling voice after seeing a human shadow form.

The black shadow, who seemed to be able absorb all light just by opening its arms like wings, landed on the ground. Kazuma smiled evilly at the demonic opponent that stood there silently.

"Now, let round two begin…"

Chapter 6: Decisive Battle

Part 1

Kssssshaaaaaaaaaaaa…

The forest rustled uneasily, shifting from the sounds made by the forest inhabitants, who were running away with all their might from the immense youki. The bugs, which had no means of sensing the danger, were unable to withstand the abnormal pressure and disappeared without a trace. Even animals that were unable to escape perished from coming in contact with the youki. The sound of their corpses raining out of the trees and littering the forest floor resounded throughout the forest. There were no visible wounds, yet they were all dead.

All sound ceased. All the youki within Ryuuya was released, and its mere existence spread death around the world.

Ayano raised Enraiha to face the silently watching Ryuuya. However, she was unable to do any more than that - She couldn't even take a step in his direction. The youki, which felt as though it would freeze

her blood, petrified her. And not only that, she could not stop her knees from trembling.

An immense fear had gripped Ayano's soul. It was difficult enough just to force herself to stand there without running away - Advancing was impossible.

Ayano had inherited Enraiha at the young age of twelve, which might have been a mistake. Because of this, Ayano had never fought an enemy more powerful than herself. Since she was always able to defeat her enemies with brute strength, there was no way for her to fight strategically when she was the one at a disadvantage.

To put it simply, after suffering her first defeat, Ayano was unable to find the courage to go up against Ryuuya.

"What are you doing? Go on!"

Kazuma said to the trembling Ayano. He continued,

"Don't worry! I'll be with you."

"How can I not worry?!"

Ayano retorted angrily. How dare this man say "Don't worry" so casually?

"There's no reason to run now, right? I won't run this time. Trust me."

Who could trust someone who just said "I'll run if there's a reason"? Ayano stared back to see Kazuma smiling deviously.

"This… This is the last time. If you betray me again, I'll kill you first!"

"No problem! I swear to God."

"…Which God?"

Ayano gave him an undisguisedly suspicious glare, but Kazuma simply replies with his untrustworthy smile,

"Who knows? But it doesn't matter who I pray to! I'm an atheist, after all."

Ayano could no longer stay angry by then, so she merely muttered in despair,

"…Enough. I'll leave the support to you."

"Leave it to me."

Ignoring Kazuma's mocking salute, Ayano dashed forward. Though she didn't, and probably wouldn't ever, realize it, the fear that had gripped her was now greatly reduced by this meaningless chat.

Ayano closed in on Ryuuya, but he took to the air the moment she reached within a few steps of him.

"…Huh?"

Ayano gave a sound of shock as she stared after Ryuuya, who had flown past her.

"Idiot! Don't get outmaneuvered so easily!"

"You… Even if you say that…"

Completely ignoring Ayano, Ryuuya aimed straight for Kazuma, showering him with wind blades as he descended. Kazuma met this with a strong updraft, crashing it into the black blades.

But that was just a feint. Ryuuya suddenly lashed out with his hidden claw, slicing down with demonic strength that could easily rip through a person as if he was a piece of tofu.

Kazuma, moving forward at an angle, barely managed to dodge it. As he did so, he lightly took the enemy's right arm and slightly diverted its path.

Ryuuya, missing, lost his balance due to the lack of resistance. Kazuma immediately took the opportunity to knee his enemy's liver through the side of his abdomen. This powerful strike, which was coupled with a strong explosion of ki, smashed into Ryuuya, who

was still toppling forward, arcing his body like a bow and throwing him back into the air. Chasing the flying body, Kazuma slammed his elbow into the enemy's chin moments before it touched the ground. Ryuuya's head was bent so far back that he could almost see his own back.

A normal person, or even a powerful wrestler, would have instantly died from such a violent attack. However, the demonized Ryuuya easily shrugged off the damage.

In fact, in mid-flight, Ryuuya directed his momentum into his right knee, aiming straight for Kazuma's jaw.

Even though the attack came from what should have been a blind spot, to Kazuma, who is synchronized with the wind spirits, there is no such thing. He steps forward, leaning to the left to avoid Ryuuya's knee, grabs the front of Ryuuya's shirt, at the same time sweeping his left leg horizontally.

In a masterful example of judo, Ryuuya's body is flipped. With Ryuuya's head about to fall flat on the ground, Kazuma strikes with his palm. Not to punch downwards, but to press. He bends down to push the

enemy's head straight into the ground, and a comfortable reaction is sent through his shoulder.

However, Kazuma did not feel Ryuuya's skull crack. Realizing instantly that he has not given his enemy a fatal blow, Kazuma uses his foot to crush Ryuuya's head, who lay on the ground facing the sky. The kick instead lands on Ryuuya's crossed arms, as he blocks Kazuma's attack.

"Chut!"

Kazuma quickly kicks away the arm that is about to grab his other leg, and jumps backwards to put some distance between them.

(To not even faint after such a fierce attack, does attacking the brain have no effect on him? To just what extent has he been transformed to a demon?…) Kazuma grumbles unhappily.

As though beating up a steel statue, he feels as if he has accomplished nothing. Ryuuya's body quickly swings back up, directly from his lying down position. This simple action is far beyond what a human can achieve, almost like a zombie from the movies.

Ryuuya releases countless wind blades as he gets up, and then, at a speed even faster than the wind

blades, strikes at Kazuma. The wind blades and his claws reach Kazuma at the same time.

"Guahhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

At the same time as the shout, Kazuma forcefully stretches his hand out towards the right arm that was swung at him. The wind forms a rapidly spinning whirlpool, as if that hand had squeezed them out. The rapid flow of air becomes a shockwave, destroying the wind blades, and Ryuuya is blown back into the air like a puppet.

It seems for a moment that he is unable to take this blow, but only for a moment, as Ryuuya adjusts his posture in the air and hovers at a fixed altitude, beginning to slowly retreat.

"Don't even think about escaping!"

Kazuma knocks the air above Ryuuya downwards. The figure that was originally gliding away slowly, suddenly flew downwards at a sharp angle, as if swatted by something, and with a speed way beyond a free-falling object, hits the ground. Ryuuya was just able to land on his two feet, his body unable to move, stuck to the ground due to the great air pressure.

As Ryuuya stands there paralyzed, Kazuma quickly closes the distance.

The wind that was forcefully blowing downwards doesn't seem to lay a finger on Kazuma. Kazuma instead seems as though drawn into it, and runs quickly inside the raging winds without hindrance.

"How… powerful, that guy is actually so powerful…"

Ayano is totally taken in by the scene in front of her eyes, completely mesmerized by the sight of Kazuma fighting. She had been unable to land even a single hit upon Ryuuya, and yet Kazuma could fight on an even level with or an even higher level than Ryuuya. Skillfully avoiding the attacks of the opponent, retaliating with perfectly timed counters, and slowly accumulating damage. This is, she realizes, what it means to be "an experienced fighter."

Forgetting that she is part of the fight as well, Ayano stands there enraptured, her eyes focused solely on Kazuma.

"—!"

When Kazuma is just a few steps away, Ryuuya, who is still trapped on the ground, looses a silent roar.

Black wind begins to rampage, breaking the bonds that had restrained him just moments before.

In the same movement with which he straightens his knees, he stretches his claws out towards the incoming Kazuma, who is running directly at him, and aims directly for the throat, executing an insane counterattack.

Kazuma, however, does not stop. Instead, as he takes his last step, he bends down as much as possible. Reaching to the far ends of his consciousness to dodge the pitch black claws passing before him, he places his palm on Ryuuya's *tanden*.

Kazuma steps onto the ground firmly. From there, gathering power which goes past his knees straight to his waist, and from the waist to his shoulders, like a spiral, and continues to become stronger as it continued to be transmitted. From his shoulder to the front of his arm, after all the energy in his body has gathered, it is released from his palm. An immense ki is released from his body through his palm, dense enough that it feels as if it could pierce through the enemy.

"Hah!"

Accompanying his shout, a force great enough to blow even an African elephant to pieces exploded right into Ryuuya's tanden, the core of a human's central nervous system. Ryuuya's body was blown away with such power he ended up embedded in a stone wall.

The ki of a person circulated around the body, originating in the tanden. Therefore, this place was the most vital of all vital areas for a *jutsushi*. Once the flow of ki has been disrupted, no matter how powerful a jutsushi might be, he would be left unable to use any *jutsu* for some time. Or that would have been the case, had Ryuuya been a human being.

Huuuuu!!

"Muah!"

Ryuuya doesn't even look injured as he rapidly releases the blades of wind once more. Kazuma barely dodges in the nick of time, and hurriedly places some distance between them.

"Damn! Bastard! That didn't work! That guy really, whole-heartedly doesn't want to be human anymore!"

"… whole-heartedly… What kind of description is that…"

Hearing Ayano's subconscious remark, Kazuma shouts out loud, "Don't just stand there and watch the show! You're supposed to be the attacker, aren't you? So why don't you grab your big torch and go beat him up!"

"Big…"

(Big torch?)

To use such a crude description of the treasure of the Kannagi clan?!

"You, I'll have a talk with you about this once this is over!"

Ignoring Ayano's furious look, Kazuma waves his hand to hush her, "Don't talk so much, *attack* little kitten."

Though her eyes burn with murder, Ayano steps forward. Perhaps reflecting her anger, Enraiha shines with a glaring glow unlike any before.

(Nee-sama, you can do it…)

Ren prays devoutly for the victory of the two.

He can only pray, since he does not possess the power to participate in their battle.

His inability to help deeply hurting his heart, Ren murmurs, "If only I had more power…"

"No, no, your 'bit' of power is just right."

"!?"

Ren turns in shock, and looks where there shouldn't be anyone.

"To break the seal placed upon our God, that bit of power is enough."

The voice sounded like it had come from the opposite direction of just earlier. Ren turns his head once more, and calls out in a rising tone, "It… it is you, Hyoue! Come out now!"

Shaaaaaaaaaa, the sound of bushes rustling in the wind, this time from the left. Out of Ren's raised palm, fire begins to erupt in a rapid stream.

In short order, the withered plants catch fire and burn furiously, but there is no sign of Hyoue. Ren glances around frantically as Hyoue's coarse voice again sounds in his ears.

"It isn't that you lack strength. It's that you're still just a brat. Your technique is what's lacking!"

"Shut…Shut up!"

Flames emerge from Ren's body. In order to prevent the enemy from moving behind him, he begins to search for Hyoue with a body wrapped in flame.

(I can't find his presence!)

He has absolutely no idea where Hyoue may be. From the beginning, En-jutsushis are a bit unbalanced in their combat abilities. Though their attacking strength is the strongest, their detection abilities are among the weakest, let alone comparable to Fuu-jutsushis.

As an En-jutsushi, Ren was still inexperienced, and was unable to handle the jutsu that the experienced Fuu-jutsushi Hyoue was using to conceal himself.

"Still too immature. A flame of that level is unable to extinguish the hatred within me," Hyoue whispers in his ear.

Though the direction from which Ren had heard Hyoue's voice was directly behind him, he could not sense his presence at all.

"Behind? Wh-Where?!"

He turned around several times, always failing to see Hyoue. No matter how swift his actions, the voice from behind never stopped.

"Over here!"

"Over here!"

"Over here!"

—Over here— —Over here— —Over here— —Over here—

This line continues to repeat like an echo. The unease of being unable to see his enemy, and the rising fear and nervousness of fighting in actual combat, stretch Ren's mind to its limit.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Driven by fear, he desires power. The power to eliminate the enemy. The power to destroy 'everything,' the power to rid himself of his fear…

In response to Ren's scream, everywhere around, fires explode into existence. The fire spirits that had been released indefinitely, obeying only their own desires for survival and rampage, burn everything to ash.

Everything the flames touched was burnt. The forest becomes a sea of flame, with mighty pillars of fire that reach the heavens and shake the earth.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

Ren, who is panicking after losing control, is attempting to create a Hell on Earth, just like his name. He continues to summon a massive amount of spirits, surpassing even the limits of his ability to control. The

trees turn to ash in the extreme heat, and the already scorched earth begins to melt.

"Ahhhhhh…ah?"

But at precisely this moment, a cold gust of wind blows past his body, cooling his head and calming his madness in an instant. The youth, shocked, turns to look in the direction the wind originated from.

Kazuma was looking attentively at his brother. Basking in those clear eyes, Ren returns to normal.

(He is looking at me!)

Kazuma looks at him with boundless trust.

"Nii-"

(Nii-sama!)

Immediately after meeting Ren's eyes, Kazuma shifts his gaze away, focusing once more on the battle with Ryuuya.

Briefly disappointed, Ren remembers once more what he needs to do. Calming his breathing, he prepares to take on the enemy's assault.

"Your brother seems to have abandoned you."

Hyoue's voice rings mockingly from behind his ear. But Ren, his head clear once again, recognizes that his enemy isn't actually behind him. It was just a di-

version, using his jutsu to mobilize the wind to carry his voice to Ren's ears. This was a very basic technique everyone in the Fuuga clan knew. Such a simple fact, and yet he hadn't noticed. Ren was ashamed at his immaturity.

"But he can't be blamed for doing so. Even working together, those two don't have a chance, let alone the luxury of taking time out to protect someone as useless as you."

Ho! Ho! Ho!

This time, hearing Hyoue's eerie laughter has no effect on Ren. He calmly searches out his presence, at the same time rejecting Hyoue's babbled nonsense.

"You're wrong."

"What is wrong?" Hyoue replies calmly.

Hyoue holds no doubts of his control of the situation. He might even think that this is not a fight, but a hunt, just a cat toying with a mouse before the kill. This is the weak point Ren grasped for.

"Nii-sama did not abandon me. It is because he believes in me, believes that I am more than enough to deal with scum like you."

"What daring words. A little punk like you who can't even find me, how are you going to defeat me??"

Indeed, in terms of detection capability, En-jutsushi were far inferior to Fuu-jutsushi. Unlike fire, air was everywhere. One of the necessary conditions for a human to survive, and the one that occupies the most space, is air. The difference in amount of space occupied directly affects the amount of information obtainable.

(But, if it is now…)

The flames that Ren had released when berserk had burnt the trees in the area, and continued to burn fiercely. The density of fire spirits in the area had increased to a point that surpassed reason. With things like this, his abilities weren't less than any Fuu-jutsushi's. Ren closes his eyes, and opens his ears to listen to the voices of the spirits.

"What's wrong? You want to beat someone like me, and yet you seem to be taking your time?"

Sounds of mockery come from every direction. A wind blade passes by his cheek, and flies straight on. Ren completely lets go of everything, and synchronizes himself with the spirits.

His five senses disappear, slowly replaced with the senses of the spirits. Relying neither on light, nor relying on sound, but instead relying on theurgy to view the world. Despite being faced with an abnormality which would drive a regular human insane, Ren adapts very easily.

(Gotcha!)

It should be said he didn't actually detect Hyoue's presence. Rather, within the areas he searched, only one refused the invasion of fire spirits. Hyoue had to be at this spot. Ren felt confident in his guess.

"Over there!"

Ren raises his palm to release a fireball. The divine power of purification slices through…

Empty space. Just empty space.

"You fool, where do you think you're aiming?…"

Seeing the flame travel in completely the wrong direction, Hyoue, concealed in a *kekkai* of wind, reveals his scorn.

Only to change expressions immediately. He watches as the flames around him branch out and rain down in a curtain of flame, aimed directly at him.

"Wh-What!?"

Hyoue is so filled with shock his eyes almost pop out of his head. The fire rains down from all directions and all at once.

With every escape route cut off by the incoming flame, this was not a predicament that could be resolved by trickery. To defend himself, he has no choice but to force the flames aside with sheer power. But Hyoue does not possess such power. Judging by strength alone, Ren wins handily.

"Wahhhhhhhhhhhh!?"

As his kekkai is pierced by the rain of fire like so much paper, Hyoue gives off a pitiful scream.

"It…it worked…?" Sensing the kekkai's disappearance, Ren says quietly, staring into space.

The trick he used was really simple. There had been no need for him to create the attacking fire himself, as he had been surrounded by burning flames all along.

Ren had purposely loosed a flame at an empty spot to trick Hyoue into letting his guard down, and then had instead used the flames that were burning around Hyoue to attack.

Had Hyoue been fighting seriously, he might have seen through the trick. It was his overconfident attitude of seeing Ren as prey, and not as an enemy, that forced him to suffer such a dreadful attack.

"You…you are really something…Kid…"

"—!?"

A black shape, still roughly discernible as human, rolls just in front of Ren. No matter how you look at it, it was just so much charcoal, and yet it still moved somehow. Every time it moved, pieces of meat that had been turned to ash fell away, revealing pitch black skin below, skin that did not seem human.

"Hoho… Watch closely… This is the power I obtained by forming a contract with the youma - a power surpassing human ability! Do you get it now, kid? Your flames just won't work against me. Hohoho… Hahahahaha!!"

"You foolish thing."

Ren's sudden speech, in a tone cold enough as to come from someone else, causes Hyoue's laughter to come to an abrupt halt.

"My flames, useless? How dare a piece of charcoal speak like a human being? Since you've already given

up on being human, nothing more need be said. Because the Kannagi flames are purifying flames. A divine power bestowed for the destruction of inhuman monsters like you!"

A golden light cleanses away the dense youki. The rampaging flames appear to be absorbed into the purifying light. The fire weakens, and slowly disappears. The formerly uncontrolled fire spirits serve to make the golden light shine all the more brilliantly.

The flames that once expanded explosively now are beginning to shrink, and yet the temperature grows. Condensed into a high density semi-materialized flame, emitting a syrupy glow, it begins to revolve around Ren.

"I, as a member of Kannagi main family, declare! Hyoue Kazamaki: the many lives that you've taken away shall now be repaid with your own!" surrounded by that blurry glow, Ren says loudly.

Faced with a tiny body that yet unleashes an immense pressure, Hyoue curls up in fear.

This is the descendant of a respected and powerful bloodline. The top of the En-jutsushis, a rightful son of the Kannagi.

A great power, formed of a thousand years of training, is about to awaken…

Part 2

"Ahhhhhhhhhhh!!"

Striking with all her might, Ayano chops Enraiha downwards.

Clang!

Ryuuya's claws make a clear sound as they deflect the blade.

(Even Enraiha cannot cut through, just what are those claws made of?)

Ayano immediately ignores the question that pops up in her mind. There's no time to think about this, I need to find some way to get past those claws…

Ayano increases the rate at which she strikes, including a number of feints in her attacks, to find a hole in Ryuuya's defense. His defense, unfortunately, is impenetrable.

"What is that idiot doing…" Kazuma spits in disgust.

The fear of loss yet lingers in Ayano's heart, causing her to forget her usual style. Adding those tricks to her attack was meaningless; she should focus on a single lethal strike instead.

At that moment, Enraiha finds its way into Ryuuya's shoulder, cleanly severing his right arm.

(Now I've got him!)

Ayano strikes at his right side with all her strength. Because of this, she fails to notice his right arm, lurking behind her back, flying directly towards her.

"Behind you!"

Kazuma's voice and the attack come at almost the same time. Ayano jumps quickly, and the right arm speeds past her like a lance.

"That was close…"

The danger wasn't over though. Ryuuya suddenly appears in front of Ayano, still in mid-air, the claws on his remaining left arm glittering with deadly intent.

Dong!

Ayano somehow manages to block, but with her legs hanging in mid-air, she is unable to hold her position. Knocked away like a cannonball, with no way to stop herself, she slams into a nearby tree.

"Argh… Ah…"

Perhaps feeling that it would be too easy, with her offering so little sport, Ryuuya opts not to pursue, instead leisurely reattaching his right arm. Wriggling

muscle tissue and nerves extend from the severed arm as the same extend from the other end, merging together. After but moments, there is no hint of the injury - his arm was completely whole once more.

And yet Ryuuya still shows no sign of attacking. He lifts his head to stare at the sky, raising his arms as if to grasp the sky with his hands.

"—!"

The instant he realizes what that gesture signifies, Kazuma sprints forward as fast as possible. Hugging Ayano's head to his chest, he forcefully slams her back onto the floor.

"Wah!"

With no time to pay it any mind, he ignores Ayano's strangled cry of protest. Lying as low to the ground as he can, he erects a kekkai of even greater density around them.

"What are you doing all of a sudden?" Ayano shouts, her nose glowing red from the pressure.

Kazuma immediately retorts at a volume twice her own, "You idiot! For what reason did you think it was necessary to engage in close combat? If you allow the enemy the time it needs to unleash such a powerful

attack, all earlier effort would be rendered meaningless."

Confronted with such a decisive answer that left no room for questions, Ayano is at a loss for words.

"…Huh…? Powerful attack…"

As she turns her head, as instructed by Kazuma, the scene revealing itself before her eyes leaves her at a loss for words. A spectacular pillar of wind connecting heaven and earth, a great vortex that tumbles as it spins, it is…

"What is…that?"

"What do you mean 'what is that?' As you can see, what 'they are' are tornadoes! Four, no five…by the way, what is the unit for tornadoes?"

Kazuma's randomly asked question does not register in Ayano's consciousness.

She gazes at the scene, as if spellbound. "Here is the roar of nature that hurls giant boulders and uproots giant trees" is all she can think about.

"…There's no way…"

"Ahhh? What did you say?"

"There's no way we can win!" Ayano turns her head to shout.

The eyes that had earlier been full of fight now carry tears. As if humbled, she falls to her feet beside Kazuma.

"It's impossible to win! Our enemy is 'that' kind of monster, just what do you expect me to do?! There's just no way to win!"

Ayano's eyes reveal an absolute despair transcending fear. "Eyes just like 'that' person's in the past" Kazuma thinks to himself.

— Did I not seek power because I hate seeing those eyes?

(Tsoi Rin…)

The weak girl that I was unable to protect in the past. No matter how difficult, no matter how painful, the girl who wanted to live on no matter what.

"I was not born into the world to be devoured by a devil."

(Those eyes shone with the light of hope, and the one who erased that light was me.)

Because he had been weak, because he had had no power.

But things were different now. He had been defeated back then, and was helpless to do anything but

watch as the girl he had sworn to protect had had her soul devoured…but things were different now.

Whether for self-fulfillment or to atone for the past, all he wanted now was to help the girl trembling before him.

Her eyes were filled with tears. Just before the first tears fall, Kazuma pokes her forehead with his finger.

Ayano leans back slightly, looking at him with wet eyes, as Kazuma smiles.

"Our jobs were clear from the start right? All you need to do is take that blade and slash Ryuuya. I'll deal with his wind."

Ayano jabs her finger towards the tornadoes as she shrieks, "Deal with…? Tornadoes?"

Kazuma merely shrugs.

"Well, about that… I'm sure there's a way. So, you just take care of him. Can you do that?"

She hesitates for a brief moment before nodding her head determinedly.

"Very good. Then let the match continue!"

Kazuma lifts Ayano, still sitting on him, with his arms and rises. Witnessing unbelievable arm and waist

strength, Ayano's eyes widen, but even more shocking was what happened afterwards.

"…Wa…Ah…"

Before Ayano, a path opens. A path, surrounded by a kekkai of wind suppressing the tornadoes, straight to Ryuuya.

"Go!"

Receiving a gentle push from that voice, Ayano instinctively dashes forward.

"Okay, even though I said all that just now… What should I do?"

After forcing an opening through the tornadoes, Kazuma grumbles to himself. Because he had boasted about it in front of someone else, he had no choice but to think of a way to take care of those five tornadoes…

"If only Ayano was of some use, then the enemy might not have the effort to spare to maintain those tornadoes…But an originally weak girl, now so scared witless she can barely walk, can't be of any use…"

The simplest method would be to create tornadoes of equal magnitude to cancel them out…

(…Nah, far too much trouble!)

Even the thought made him feel tired. There had to be an easier way…

"Wait a minute, a tornado is actually the upward flow of air right… in that case… Good, let's do this."

Kazuma lets the column of wind comprising the tornado rise even higher, raising the air to the lower stratosphere.

The air brought by the updraft cools rapidly, and the water particles it contains become tiny drops of ice that combine to form hailstones. As they fall once again, the hailstones melt, cooling the surrounding air even further, making the air heavy, and it drops down at a high speed. This great downward airflow is known as a "downburst."

The natural top speed of a downburst is comparable to a tornado, and Kazuma speeds it up even further. This section of air, pulled down from an extremely high altitude, easily surpasses the speed of sound.

The supersonic wind blade slices the tornadoes wide open, and the accompanying shock wave completely destroys what remains. Without any notable resistance, the raging winds easily erases any hint of

the tornadoes, while directing all extra energy towards Ryuuya.

"Gwahhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

In the midst of the thunder of destruction came a sharp scream, lacking of femininity.

(Gwah? Ohhh…)

Kazuma claps his hands as he realizes what happened.

"Darn, I completely forgot to avoid you. Sorry."

"You idiot! Go to hell!" Ayano furiously shouts.

Yet for some reason, she is uninjured. Maybe the wind spirits had automatically avoided her?

Though Ayano continued to fuss, she quieted down as the dust settled and the scene slowly revealed itself to her.

The mountain view had changed. Originally a lush green forest, now uprooted trees lay scattered about, and the forest's surface had been dug up, forming a tract of empty land. All this due to Ryuuya's tornadoes and Kazuma's downburst.

(These guys are really monsters…)

Ayano gazes at Kazuma, struck with awe, but that flippant look of his betrays no sign of his magnificent power.

"Hey, this is a good opportunity! Ayano," Kazuma hushes, no, tells her.

Even something like Ryuuya suffered tremendous damage from this assault. While his limbs were largely intact, deep cuts scored his body - wounds excreting a black mist instead of blood.

(When I cut him earlier, nothing like that came out…)

Though annoyed at the huge difference in power between her and Kazuma, now wasn't the time to worry about such things, and so Ayano took up Enraiha once more to stand before Ryuuya.

(Still alive - what a monster.)

Just as Ayano was facing off with Ryuuya, Kazuma's expression grew more serious.

Kazuma could feel the end of the road looming.

Even when combining their powers, they had been unable to deliver Ryuuya a fatal blow. Though they currently appeared to hold the advantage, there was no way to win a prolonged fight.

There had never been a human that could exceed the youma in terms of physical stamina. This was because the youma possessed minds far surpassing their bodies, and could easily overcome their bodies limitations through sheer willpower.

(Should I use it? Even though I really don't want the Kannagi to learn of it, I guess there's no choice. And, I guess they'll hear it from Ren sooner or later, anyway. Either way, life is something irreplaceable.)

There was just one problem. Leaving breaking the seal aside, to gather enough power to truly destroy Ryuuya required a lot of preparation. During this time, Ayano would be left completely defenseless, and what would happen then has already been seen.

(So, what to do…)

He ponders deeply for a brief moment.

(So be it. This will be a test for her as well.)

Lions pushed their cubs off cliffs without hesitation. Kazuma would have to do the same for Ayano.

"Ayano! I am going to play my strongest card! Buy me some time!"

"Don't shout it out loud like that! Idiot!" Ayano shouts in a pained voice.

She was seriously crying out to Kazuma.

As Kazuma had expected, Ryuuya struck instantly. In the blink of an eye, the defending and offensive parties had switched sides, as wind blades raced towards Ayano.

"Kazuma you big idiot! After I die, I will definitely come back to haunt you as a vengeful spirit! No matter how many times you change houses, I will burn them down and make sure the real estate agencies blacklist you!" Ayano shouts in a tone close to tears, as she tries her best to dodge the blades.

Regrettably, Kazuma was in a state of intense concentration by then, and Ayano's furious promise of eternal vengeance went unnoticed.

Sinking deep within his consciousness, he opens the "door" within himself. Within the "door" lay an azure sky as wide as the eye can see.

This place was a space that existed within "that being" - no, every corner of this space was filled with that being. This space was the being itself.

By opening the "door," Kazuma and "that being" merged to form a single entity. Kazuma was reborn, becoming a human and the ruler of spirits at the same

time, commanding all wind in existence as a high level jutsushi.

His consciousness expanded without limit. For as far as his mind could reach, an area of about a hundred kilometers in radius, all wind spirits located therein became Kazuma's receptors, continuously transmitting an endless stream of information.

This immense amount of data - of which a human's weak and fragile mind would be unable to handle the tiniest fraction - Kazuma controlled with his will. He picked out the necessary data from the scene in front of him, at the same time surveying the situation of everything within his domain. This was the viewpoint of a god - a power beyond human knowledge or understanding.

(Ren… still alive. Very good.)

With his expanded perception, he can clearly see the battle between Ren and Hyoue, more than a kilometer away. It goes without saying, the same goes for Ayano's battle…

Without Kazuma to cover for her, Ayano is forced into a one-sided defense. Unable to even think about retaliating, every thought, every action is devoted to

dodging the incoming claws and blades of wind - to survival

(…Are you still not ready Kazuma?)

Glancing at Kazuma from time to time, Kazuma, focusing deeply, did not appear to notice. Despite her reluctance to admit it, the lack of attention filled her with unease.

She was scared, but Kazuma was not here to say something stupid to loosen her up, not now. He did not poke her head, or smile that disrespectful smile. For the first time, Ayano realizes how many times she has been saved by that flippant smile of his.

"Ahhh!"

A pitch black wind smashes into Ayano like a hammer. The powerful blow knocks her off her feet, throwing her backwards through the air. She lands on her back, but the force of the impact was so great she found herself rolling three times before slamming into a stone wall with a great crash.

(No more! I can't hold on any longer…!)

Ayano turns pleadingly to Kazuma, desperate for help, and for a short-lived moment, she felt certain she had seen a smirk travel across his face.

Ryuuya took the opportunity to aim more wind blades at Ayano, who continued to lay there, unmoving. Even so, Ayano continued to stare at Kazuma.

(Ever since the moment when I saw him again yesterday, I've despised that guy.

Worse than Hyoue or Ryuuya, I refuse to even acknowledge his existence.

Because he is stronger than me? No, not just that.

Because of his flippant attitude? No, that's just a front, a facade of his.

The real him completely ignores my existence, does not care about me, and *that* is more unforgivable than anything else.

And so I resist, and so I quarrel with him, that he might acknowledge me.

But…he's given up on me.

"You will finish him" had become "buy me some time," "I will do everything," "I no longer have any expectations of you."

Even now, he is watching everything, mocking how pathetic I look.)

"A kitten is just a kitten," she felt she could hear his condescending voice say.

"Don't look down on me!"

An angry roar rocks the air, a furious flame consumes the blades of wind.

Ayano forces her swaying body to stand, her eyes focus on Ryuuya, but within, her mind continues to rail against Kazuma.

There was simply no way she would accept, or even tolerate, that she, the wielder of Enraiha, was believed to be useless.

She knew very well how to overturn this flawed belief completely. For a man like Kazuma, there was no point in further words.

The way to prove herself was with raw, overwhelming power.

"'Buy me some time'? Don't joke around. I will finish him off myself, and you can just stand there until you die of boredom!"

Ayano raises Enraiha, and begins to gather ki. The flame that had always burned golden begins to flare red. This crimson flame continues to amass upon Enraiha.

Loosing a howl of pure rage, Ayano begins to run. Moving at an astonishing speed, which did not even

leave an afterimage, she suddenly appears before Ryuuya, as if by teleportation, and swings downwards with all her might.

There were no tricks, just a single slice. Without time to dodge, Ryuuya crosses his arms to block the strike. That is, he tried to block it.

Burning with a crimson glow, Enraiha bore the divine flame to which there was no possible defense, severing all ten claws in one stroke, and with a quick turn, Ryuuya's left arm soon follows.

She slices at Ryuuya's now defenseless left side, but at this moment, the sliced off arm attacks Ayano from behind like the other arm had done previously.

This time, however, Ayano reverses her grip on Enraiha, and without even turning, stabs backwards. Enraiha mercilessly pierces through the arm that was flying through the air.

"Begone!"

Scorched from the inside-out, the arm was consumed in an instant. Never stopping, Ayano continued to chase after Ryuuya, who had begun a slow retreat. Again with that shocking speed, she easily caught Ryuuya once more.

The crimson blade flashes brightly, slicing Ryuuya from the shoulders to the legs. A quick turn of the blade and it continues to slice through the demonic body.

But even though his body has been chopped into four pieces, Ryuuya has yet to be destroyed. His listless eyes continue to gaze eerily at Ayano.

Ayano jumps backwards, but this time, not to run.

It all ends now!

"Namo, Sanmanduo, Warila Lan, Han!"

She chants the Acalanatha sutra. The chant itself possessed no power or meaning - it was just a string of keywords she had learned in her training. Having learned the mantra along with the complicated jutsu activation sequence, the two had become linked in her mind. For her, using the jutsu was a reflex when chanting the sutra.

As she lands, Ayano stabs Enraiha into the ground, activating the jutsu.

"Thrust of the Exorcising Supreme Flame!"

A crown of light burst forth from the ground with Ryuuya at its center, forming a hemispherical kekkai. The fire spirits within Enraiha darted through from beneath the ground, releasing all their heat within the barrier.

The earth under Ryuuya's feet instantly vaporized, and the spherical kekkai can now be seen in full view. The barrier efficiently reflected all heat inwards, focusing the energy at its center.

This was Ayano's strongest exorcism jutsu: to seal the youma in a kekkai, leaving nothing to escape but ashes.

"Hah! How's that?"

Ayano smiles proudly, about to look in Kazuma's direction, when she suddenly stops in her tracks, and stares at Ryuuya, caught within the kekkai.

Trapped in scorching plasma, Ryuuya had become nothing more than a piece of meat, having lost all signs of his previous appearance.

(He shouldn't have the power to resist anymore…but what is this youki?!)

Gurgle…Gurgle…Gurgle…

Right before Ayano eyes, the surface of the meat seemed to boil as one bubble after another began to appear. The eerie piece of meat did not appear to care that it was tens of thousands of degrees within the kekkai, and was multiplying at a high rate.

When the piece of meat had finished multiplying, the shape slowly changed. Sticks of meat stretched out from four areas, and a small sphere appeared at the top - the monster was complete.

It had probably intended to mimic human form, with hands and legs and head, body parts that could be recognized.

But that was it.

Like an ugly design a small child might make with meat colored clay, it was a likeness of the evil of mankind, an unforgivable insult to humanity.

The monster places its hands on the kekkai to force it open. That is to say, the sticks that passed for its hands did, and from the ugliness of its motions, it

lacked any joints as well. If human arms were snakes, they would probably look like this!

"…This is not… possible…?"

The monster easily dispels the kekkai, and steps out. It feels so ugly and evil that Ayano involuntarily takes a step back, tripping and losing her balance.

"Wah!"

Falling here means certain death. The premonition of death approaching gives her goosebumps.

But…the feeling on her back is not that of the cold, hard floor. Something warm had taken hold of this body, frozen with anxiety.

A strong hand caresses Ayano's head, and, as if whispering in her ear, a low, calm voice makes her ear twitch.

"That is enough. You did very well."

From the gentle, yet firm grip that enveloped her arm, Ayano feels an indescribable calm fall over her. Her tense body relaxes, bit by bit, entrusting everything to that wide chest behind her.

"You did very well."

That sentence repeats over and over in her mind. Those four mundane words make her happier than anything else in the world.

To be recognized by him makes her proud.

The man behind her talks in a comfortable tone that makes a shiver run down her back, and goes on to say…

"Very well done…for a kitten."

Pak!

Ayano pushes Kazuma's hand away with all her might. How is it possible that a moment ago she actually felt that this kind of guy's chest could possibly be comforting? Ayano felt whole-heartedly ashamed of herself.

"You're… Huh…?"

Sensing something off in her surroundings, Ayano looks around and immediately understands.

The air shines with a blue glow.

The slow-flowing blue air holds an enormous amount of energy. Ryuuya's black winds are repelled by the azure glow, and compress around their master.

"This… Impossible… 'Purification'!?"

The secret power to destroy evil, bestowed only upon the Kannagi…and this magnitude!

"To surround the entire mountain with his winds? And such a massive amount of spirits, how did…" Ayano turns her head to ask, and is left speechless once more.

Knowing very well the reason for her shock, Kazuma smiles playfully, enjoying Ayano's stunned look.

"That… What is… Your eyes?"

"Oh these? They were marked by the Lord of Wind Spirits."

Kazuma's blue eyes flash, as he calmly says something shocking.

"Spi…rit…Lord…?" Ayano dumbly repeats.

This fact that was beyond imagination had stopped all thought.

"… N-No way—!?"

Bright as the azure sky, eyes that couldn't possibly be clearer - that was proof of the contract with the Lord of Wind Spirits. Ruling all the air on this planet, only a man bestowed with everything could be marked by this stigma.

Even in the legends, there had only been a few people with such a mark: the ancient King Solomon who governed the 72 demon lords and Moses who led the Hebrews and had contracted with Jehovah.

And after that would be the first chief of the Kannagi, who had been bestowed with Enraiha.

"Contractor." Someone who had formed a contract with a supernatural existence. They called them "Contractors".

But, to actually be confirmed, there is only one Contractor in history who has been proven to exist. "The first" Contractor was how he had come to be praised in modern legend.

"Come! It's about time you slept, Ryuuya!"

The azure wind begins to swirl like a maelstrom, with Ryuuya at its center. The maelstrom was, of course, Kazuma's creation, utilizing all the wind spirits at his command, and the area it spans can be seen even from outer space.

Part 3

Slice.

Hyoue's wind blades cut deeply into Ren's arms.

"Wahhhhhh-!"

Against the blades of wind, Ren can only dodge. The relentless assault does not even allow him to stand.

Hyoue cackles as he watches Ren. The scene of a jutsushi of the Kannagi main family, unable to even stand beneath his attacks, just couldn't get any funnier.

(Just you watch, Genma! Juugo! You're next! The humiliation we suffered, you shall receive ten thousand fold!)

A hysterical laughter shakes the air.

Hyoue looks down on Ren, who has finally managed to rise, and smugly shouts, full of pride, "Now do you understand the difference between us? You should just surrender before you get hurt further…If you're too heavily wounded, it might hinder the removal of the seal!"

Hahahaha…

Ren sends golden flame in the direction of the laughter, but while the flame may possess the power to destroy Hyoue, if it misses, it's simply a waste of effort.

"Wah!"

A sudden, violent shock wave strikes Ren's head, sending him reeling and leaving him feeling as though his brain were bouncing in his skull. For a few moments, he wavers on the edge of unconsciousness.

Just standing there, completely defenseless, has made Ren an easy target. But though there have been several such instances before, Hyoue has yet to finish him off. It can only be expected, though, as Hyoue does not want Ren's corpse; he needs him alive. Furthermore, there was still more fun to be had in his torment.

Hyoue, who has given up his humanity, now possesses a great power, incomparable to the past.

Of course, Ren is still far more powerful, but the gap in skill and experience is just too large. He is being toyed with, unable to show even half his power.

"Isn't it about time to give up? You know you can't win, right?"

Hyoue is slowly crucifying him, deliberately avoiding any fatal injuries. Time and again he tries to break Ren's will, targeting his weaknesses to force him to bow to despair, but Ren refuses to give in.

"I refuse! I promised Nii-sama that I would never give up, that I would live on no matter what! I will never obey you, never be used by you, and will never let you kill again!"

Despite cuts which run all over his body, blood that pours down his face and drenches his clothes, Ren's eyes never lose their shine. Faced with this proud and majestic vision, even Hyoue, who undoubtedly holds the advantage, cannot help but be wary.

"Hmph. In that case, let's test the limits of that pride!" he spits, as he prepares to unleash more wind blades-

"Wha!?"

Hyoue gives off a strangled cry, stretching his arms to hug his body. Hidden beneath his arms, something seems to be wriggling. Hyoue tightens his grip, intending to suppress whatever it is, but the eerie wriggling only spreads to his arms.

His entire body is wracked with convulsions. His muscles seize violently, before eventually bursting.

Hyoue had been surrounded by Kazuma's purifying winds. A great power had severed his connection to Ryuuya. Losing Ryuuya's protection, the demonic powers within Hyoue had begun to rampage.

Ren does not waste the opportunity, and races towards him.

"Ki…Kid… Wahhhhh!"

As Hyoue attempts to defend himself, his raging body only grows worse. He is now forced to use his full power simply to restrain his now uncontrollable body.

Ren does not slow. Knocking into Hyoue at full speed, he hooks his arms around Hyoue's knees, and gives a mighty pull.

The powerful tackle leaves the two of them tangled on the ground. Ren hugs Hyoue tightly, and softly whispers…

"I won't miss at this distance."

"You…You fool! Let me go!"

No longer concerned about losing control, Hyoue releases his blades of wind.

But Ren is quicker. Hugging the shaking body, he shouts hoarsely.

"**BURN!**"

A brilliant golden pillar of flame roars into the sky. The purifying pillar of fire leaves no trace of the tainted body and even more tainted soul of the old man who had fallen into darkness.

"——!!"

It even swallows his dying scream.

Ryuuya has lost control of his black wind. The strong, azure wind separates the berserk spirits from their dark master, absorbing them.

"Ryuuya's wind is…being consumed?" Ayano whispers in shock.

"Terrifying power" is not enough to describe the scene before her. Though there have been a number of logic-defying events today, this is by far the most ridiculous.

The wind surrounding Ryuuya releases the frenzied spirits before absorbing them, further increasing its power.

Even so, Ryuuya still isn't defeated and continues to release his dark, corrupt youki to defend against the

purifying winds. However, he is unable to negate the purification completely, and as the azure wind closes on him, the surface of his body begins to boil and bubble. Slowly, very slowly, but surely, his body is being dismantled, piece by piece.

(Almost like a final battle between monsters.)

This unseemly thought running through her mind, Ayano begins to move. Although her power is by far the weakest of the three, she is still a participant, nor can her power be ignored, for she possesses the power to end the stalemate, and she knows her duty well.

— You will finish him off, can you do it? —

"I'll show you!"

Ryuuya *leaps* backwards, intending to escape Ayano. His movements had slowed significantly, and he no longer had the means to dodge her attacks.

But Ayano chases after him, focused only on delivering the final strike! Ryuuya changes the tip of his arms into blades as a last ditch defense. The meat colored blades he raised above his head radiated a hard light.

"That won't save you now!"

Ayano furiously swings Enraiha downwards, no thought to defense. She instinctively realizes that this is the deciding moment. Kazuma has no power to spare to aid her and if she is blocked again, they are sure to lose.

The crimson glow arcs downwards without encountering any resistance, as if slicing through air.

The cloven meat blades that serve for Ryuuya's arms dissolve into the azure air as Enraiha carves its way into the top of his head, stopping at his heart. She takes a risk not cutting Ryuuya in two, choosing instead to call forth fire spirits from Enraiha directly within the wound…and igniting them.

Ryuuya's body explodes. Pieces of scattered meat are blown away by the flame, carried away by the wind and swallowed by the azure light. In the end, every trace of his existence had been erased.

This was the end of Ryuuya, no, the end of the unnamed youma who had founded the Fuuga clan.

The azure winds slowly fade, their power of purification weakening as they spread in all directions, probably to continue restoration of this youki polluted world.

Watching the wind spirits leave, Ayano is captivated by the scene.

"Damn it, just pennies for such hard work. I'll never take any jobs from the Kannagi again."

And again, a line that completely disregarded the mood spoiled everything. Ayano turns angrily, to see Kazuma lying spread-eagled on the floor. Walking over to him, he doesn't move. He appears to be completely drained.

(No matter how strong he might be, he is still human.)

"After all he almost single-handedly handed Ryuuya defeat. I think I can forgive him one or two rude lines!" Ayano thinks generously.

"Great work," she thanks him.

Kazuma does not reply, and merely sniffs.

She kneels down beside him.

"Hey, Kazuma?"

Neither expecting an answer, nor receiving one, she continues.

"Even if you'd been alone, you could've won anyway, couldn't you?"

"That's pushing it."

This time, Kazuma finally reacts. His eyes, having regained their original black luster, turn to Ayano.

"A contract with a Lord of Spirits does not mean I am omnipotent. Though I may have limitless power at my disposal, I am limited by what I can control. I am still subject to human limitations, after all."

"Hmm? Maybe so. Besides, you still need time to prepare. You would definitely have been attacked by then, right?"

"…Yep. That's right."

Though outwardly he answers without hesitation, Ayano didn't miss a brief shift in his gaze.

"Kazuma?"

"Yes?"

His poker face is flawless, but it is already too late.

Ayano flops down on top of him, grabbing him by his collar, as if ready to strangle him. Kazuma can offer no resistance, and he remains spread-eagled on the floor.

"To push a man down like this - what a shameless girl. The Soushu would cry if he saw this."

Belying his exhausted state, his mouth is still at 100%.

"Don't joke around, now answer me. When were you ready?"

Despite Ayano's grip growing more forceful by the second, Kazuma replies carelessly.

"Right about the moment when you were blown away?"

"Then, why didn't you do anything earlier!?"

By now, Ayano's full strength was concentrated in her hands, and yet Kazuma replies calmly, as if nothing was happening.

"You're wrong to blame me. It was for your own good that I waited."

"Which part!?"

Ayano is bristling, on the edge of exploding. If Kazuma does not provide a legitimate reason here, she intends to stab him with Enraiha.

"From the way things looked, if I'd ended it without you being able to land a single blow, you would have been doomed to be a loser for the rest of your life."

"Ugh…"

His dead-on remark hits her squarely, leaving her momentarily speechless. Indeed, if all she had done back then was escape from Ryuuya's attacks, leaving everything to Kazuma, she might never have regained the courage to fight again. Someone unable to over-

come her fear, a jutsushi that could only fight enemies weaker than herself, simply could not be relied upon, no matter how strong.

"When I saw that you had finally managed to gather your courage, I decided to watch for a bit. Your performance wasn't half bad until about midway through. If he hadn't escaped right then, you probably would even have won!"

"Eh? You mean to say that my jutsu worked?"

"No. That was absolutely worthless."

Kazuma continues straightforwardly, "You are the wielder of Enraiha. There is no need to resort to tricks or lousy jutsu. If cutting him in four doesn't kill him, then just keep cutting until there's nothing left."

"… Sorry for being 'lousy.'"

"That's not what you should be sorry for."

Kazuma continues his ruthless criticism.

"You need to practice your swordsmanship. The way things are, there's no point in you having Enraiha."

"I know…"

"But…that last strike was pretty good. It skillfully used the characteristics of Enraiha as both a sword and a magical artifact."

Hearing the unexpected praise, Ayano blushes. She is suddenly filled with pleasure. In spite of the countless flaws in his personality, and the disgust she feels as she realizes she is dancing in the palm of his hand, the throbbing in her chest is undeniable.

"You… Like you're so great. Just what do you know about Enraiha?"

Despite speaking harshly in an attempt to hide her embarrassment, her ploy had obviously failed. Kazuma smiles at Ayano, with a look that seems to see through it all.

"Oh. One more thing. It's best not to sit on a man dressed like that."

"…Huh?"

"Even if you *are* a little girl with neither breasts nor sensuality, other people might misunderstand!"

Ayano inadvertently glances at herself…and freezes. Unable to withstand the strenuous battle, her uniform is completely shredded. Even her underwear is

partly torn, almost to the point where it failed to cover her body.

Seeing Kazuma's eyes that "seem to see through it all," Ayano blushes up to her ears.

"Id…Idiot—!!"

A scream reverberates through the uninhabited forest.

"Nii-sama!"

Recognizing the ones approaching as Kazuma and Ayano, Ren cries out with joy, as he tries to run towards them, but his body, weak from injury, does not allow him to do so.

"Wah…"

A gust of wind gently carries Ren, who had tripped and was about to fall, right into his brother's arms. Kazuma hugs him tightly, patting his head. Ren hugs his brother back, never intending to let go.

"You did very well, Ren. A fine job."

"Thank you, Nii-sama…?"

Their conversation suddenly ends as Ren stretches his hand to Kazuma's cheek, where there lies a very clear, very red, hand-print.

Faced with the silent question, Kazuma smiles and replies, "Well, just now, after defeating Ryuuya, I met an even more vicious enemy. I almost died."

Having said this, he turns in Ayano's direction. Ayano, now covered by Kazuma's jacket, turns away in anger, ignoring him.

"Ah…Hmm…"

Ren somewhat understands, but he has the unshakable feeling that to speak those words would be to endanger his life. Desperately, he tries to change the topic.

"Ryu-Ryuuya has also been defeated, so it's finally over!"

Trying his best to show an innocent smile, Ren laments his pitifulness.

"That's right. Let's go home! Ayano, how's the car?"

"It burned up," Ayano immediately replies, as Kazuma eyes her with suspicion.

"It…It wasn't me! It was blown away by Ryuuya's wind, and when it smashed into the ground it caught on fire."

Ayano tries to explain, but even so, Kazuma's eyes remain full of suspicion.

Lifting his head to gaze into the clear night sky, Kazuma tells Ren, "Never mind. Taking a moonlight stroll through the mountains isn't too bad now and again."

"…if we don't meet with an accident," hearing Kazuma's words that seem to be avoiding reality, Ayano interjects calmly.

"Oh? Did the root of all evil just say something?"

"What?! You were the one who abandoned me! It's *your* fault this happened!"

"… Please stop arguing, the two of you."

Ren's tired voice tries to pacify the pair, but they don't appear to notice, and only continue to energetically accuse each other.

Looking up at the moon, so much like a silver plate, Ren ponders the cruel reality of life. Ryuuya and Hyoue have both been eliminated, the Fuuga's ambitions smashed to pieces. Everything was perfectly settled, so why is a happy ending still out of reach?

With no end to the bickering in sight, and no longer with the strength to stop them, Ren leans against his brother's chest, and slowly gives in to his drowsiness,

taking the pleasing sounds of his beloved brother and sister as a lullaby.

Epilogue

On an autumn afternoon with a clear sky, on a luxurious hospital bed of a single-patient ward, Genma is leisurely feeling sleepy.

Maybe because it has been such a long time since he last took a break, Genma lets his guard down. As he came to this realization, he noticed a presence standing beside his bed. Quickly hiding his startled frame of mind, he opens his eyes with a solemn expression.

"Yo!"

The intruder bends his lips in a smile, as if to say, "You finally noticed?"

His grown-up son appears before his eyes. There is no sign of the inferiority that caused Kazuma to humor Genma's mood four years ago, and Kazuma calmly meets Genma's gaze.

"Kazuma, is it?"

"Everything's finished."

A crisp, concise report, there is no better way to put it.

"Is that so? I apologize for the trouble we've caused."

"Seriously. Reflect on it."

Unbelievably, Genma does not mind his arrogant, disrespectful tone. He even feels comfortable with Kazuma's new calm, equivalent attitude.

"There's a chair over there, right?

Kazuma ignores his father's words. Walking to the window, he sits by the window frame, and slowly pulls out a cigarette.

"This hospital does not allow smoking."

"…I know!" he replies, lighting the cigarette.

They are still a pair of father and son incapable of normal conversation.

The silence continues for a while. Kazuma stares at the scenery outside the window, while Genma focuses on the ceiling.

"Miyuki…do you resent her?"

Ending the silence, Genma speaks first. Kazuma places his eyes on his father, who stubbornly continues to stare at the ceiling.

"You knew?"

This is not a condemnation. Kazuma replies as though it does not concern him, his interest apparently lies in Genma's reaction.

"No. Yesterday the Soushu came to visit. I asked about it then."

"Yesterday?"

Given the hospital's visiting hours, that would have been before Ryuuya's defeat, or maybe even when they were still on the way there. Whether it was because he trusted them, or because they were no longer in Tokyo; at any rate, it was quite bold of him.

"I don't resent her. Recently, many parents don't love their children. Though she doesn't love me, I don't recall liking her either, so I guess we're the same."

He says this smoothly; the truth does not matter anymore anyway. "The woman who gave birth to me," that is what he thinks of Miyuki. Nothing more, nothing less.

"Is that so…In that case, allow me to ask. Given what you said, would you be willing to return home?"

"Oh? Pretty willful of you to ask that now, isn't it, oyaji?"

Kazuma feels disappointed. Genma should not be the kind of man to change his mind and hope to make up simply because his abandoned son is now very capable.

"I am not asking you to return as a jutsushi for the Kannagi. I hope that you will return as my son, and once more bear the Kannagi name. If you want, I am willing to kneel in apology. So come back."

Genma's eyes never move from the ceiling as he says this.

Kazuma's jaw drops, and his cigarette falls onto the floor. He subconsciously steps on it to extinguish the flame.

It is plain to see that this is far beyond his expectations. He is shocked - that unyielding father of his is actually willing to give in to such an extent.

To be quite honest, he is tempted. But…

"…I cannot do that."

For Kazuma, this is the only possible answer.

"I don't hate you, Oyaji, nor that woman. Nevertheless, I can't do it. Four years ago I ran. I abandoned everything, including the me back then."

"If I was still the same little kid I was then, then maybe it would be fine, but not now. Things that I will not abandon and things that I must not abandon - there are too many now. I cannot simply start over again."

The one who made the decision to bear these things under the name of Kazuma Yagami, to walk this path no matter how red the road, is himself. To pretend they never happened cannot be done, to forget they happened cannot be done, because these things will never allow him to rely on the protection of others.

"That's how it is. Thank you for your good intentions," he says easily, lighting up a new cigarette.

"Is that so?"

Unable to catch any sign of sorrow, Genma nods his head once, and silence visits them once more. Only, this time, it is a tranquil silence, rather than the uncomfortable silence from earlier.

Even if he does not wish to return to the Kannagi, Kazuma still calls Genma "Oyaji" as usual, acknowledging his presence. Despite what he may say, he has not completely let go of his past.

These kinds of feelings are conveyed not through words, a fact the two of them know very well.

It is not the one-sided relationship of a father protecting his son, but one of mutual respect - a relationship based on the pretext that they are equals.

Compared to relationships founded on affection and emotion, ones built on warmth, this type of relationship suits the two better.

"Then, I shall take my leave."

After silently finishing his second cigarette, Kazuma stands.

"What're your plans?"

"Well, staying in Japan for the moment might not be too bad. After all, I had the pleasure of enjoying such an exciting development as soon as I got back."

"Is that so?"

A short response. As brazen as ever, an attitude he had become accustomed to. Nevertheless, it is human nature to desire to change others.

"Cya then! You're old already, so don't push yourself too hard."

Leaving with this taunting remark, Kazuma disappears out the tenth story window.

"Hmph, that kid…"

Watching the curtains sway in the wind, Genma grumbles.

Originally, a reprimand might have been in mind, but the smile on his mouth brings an end to any such thoughts. Without realizing it, his tone mirrors that of Juugo's "this stubborn daughter."

A cold breeze blows in from the open window. Though it's comfortable for the moment, it's likely to get cold very soon.

"Opening the window, but not closing it. That idiot."

Still unable to stand on his own, Genma scolds Kazuma as he decides whether to endure the cold wind until he catches cold, or to give in and summon a nurse.

Looking up at his father's window, Kazuma reveals an impish smile.

"Try not to catch a cold, Oyaji."

With that, he turns his back to the hospital, and walks away without a destination in mind. This is how it's always been, and this is how it always will be.

(For the time being, why don't I look for somewhere to stay.)

The wind blows at the man's back. Meaningfully humming, he takes lively steps and slowly disappears.